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**A Revolutionary Idea: Gilbert Stuart Paints Sarah Morton  
as the First Woman of Ideas in  
American Art**

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**A Revolutionary Idea: Gilbert Stuart Paints Sarah Morton  
as the First Woman of Ideas in  
American Art**

by

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**A Revolutionary Idea: Gilbert Stuart Paints Sarah Morton**  
**as the First Woman of Ideas in**  
**American Art**

Amy Elizabeth Shoultz, Ph.D.

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In 1800, Gilbert Stuart began three paintings of his friend, republican writer, Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton—the *Worcester*, *Winterthur*, and *Boston* portraits. While Morton has been remembered more for a tragic personal family scandal than for her literary endeavors, Stuart’s provocative images acknowledged her as both a poet and an intellect. His portraits presented a progressive and potentially controversial interpretation of his sitter—the lovely and learned Morton—by prioritizing the writer’s life of the mind rather than her socially prescribed life in the world. This study reconstructs the circumstances by which Stuart composed the group of Morton paintings that culminate in his unorthodox *Worcester* rendering through which he ultimately depicted Morton as the first woman of ideas in American art. Supported by close readings of her work, this dissertation illuminates both the course and depth of the exceptional personal and professional relationship between Morton and Stuart. The paths of the two republican figures crossed at several historic junctures and is highlighted by the interconnectivity of their work. Most significantly, the Stuart portraits represent an ideal lens through which to view Morton’s

life and work as well as to follow the Boston native's transformation into one of America's earliest women of ideas.

## Table of Contents

A Revolutionary Idea: Gilbert Stuart Paints Sarah Morton as a Woman of Ideas .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Chapter One: Her Mind and Its Thoughts: The Many Veils of Mrs. Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton .....	23
In Pursuit of a Name: Morton's Early Life as Simply Sarah Apthorp .....	28
Putting a Face to a Name: Framing Morton's History Through American Portraiture .....	32
Educating Sarah: The Accomplishments of Sarah Wentworth Apthorp .....	35
Return to Apthorp Mansion: Pomp, Circumstance, and the Man with "Soul-illumined Eyes" .....	41
The Quarrel over "Constantia": Pseudonyms and Identity in American Manuscript Culture .....	45
Strains of Discord at Home—"Luxury, Vanity, Foppery" at Large .....	48
The Fatal Consequences of Seduction: "Guilty Innocence," "Black Ingratitude," and Blemished Virtue .....	54
<i>Finis</i> for Fanny" "Self-Murder" and an "Insane State of Mind" in Republican Boston .....	59
The Dubious Legacy of <i>The Power of Sympathy</i> : Mistaken Identify And Morton's "Solitary Self," Founded in Truth .....	63
Philenia Strikes Back: <i>Ouâbi</i> , A Literary Riposte to <i>The Power of Sympathy</i> .....	67
Salons American Style: Morton's "Sky Parlor" and the Pseudo-Public Sphere .....	71

Chapter Two: Keeping Up Appearances: The Public Face, the Printed Word, and The Spectacle of the Private .....	75
Reputation and the Word: Republican Virtue on Parade and in Print .....	82
Slander-Loving Readers and the <i>Sans Souci</i> : Chronicling the <i>Bon Temps</i> of Boston's <i>Beau Monde</i> .....	89
What News?: Literacy and Cultural Transformation in the Republic of Readers .....	95
Printing the Public: Making the News and the Newsworthy Subject .....	104
Pressing Concerns: Vehicles of Knowledge or Vehicles for Self-promotion ...	107
Republic Readership: Audience Participation and the Myth of the Private Sphere .....	111
Sentimental Journey: "Overstimulation," the <i>Coeur Sensible</i> , and American Sensibility .....	116
Sheltered Women and Sensible Readers: Sympathy and American Character .....	122
Republic of Letters or a Republic of "Scandal-Mongers"?: Crime Reportage and the "Propensity to Scandal" .....	126
Chapter Three: Women in the Republican Eye: Sarah Morton and Boston's Public Sphere .....	130
The Perils of Overexposure: High-Profile Women and <i>Natural Feminine</i> Modesty .....	135
"Home is the Mother's Province": Morton's Self-Determination and the Rhetoric of American Domesticity .....	139
"Unmeaning Applause" and "Tickling the Idle Ear": The Interior Designs of the Accomplished Woman .....	148
Women in Print: American Identify and Feminizing the Public Sphere .....	152
Chapter Four: Revolutionary Liaisons and Strategic Alliances: Morton's Public	



Relations and the Making of an American Woman of Ideas.....	158
Strategic Alliances: Public Men and the Reinvention of Morton.....	162
A Triangular Affair: The Morton, Dunn, and Stuart Connection.....	168
Revolutionary Liaison: The “Goddess of Revenge” and the “Great Lover with a Wooden Leg”.....	172
“Monsieur was cordial . . . all things considered”: The Rise and Progress of an American Salonniere.....	176
Chapter Five: Lifting the Veil on the Enigmatic Mrs. M.: Gilbert Stuart’s Revolutionary Portrait of an American Woman of Ideas.....	182
Lost in Translation: West, Stuart, and the Grand Manner in American Art.....	185
The Worthy Subject: Gender and Eighteenth-Century Portraiture.....	192
Reading Women: Portraiture and the Literate Woman.....	196
Face Fetish: The Preeminence of Portraiture in Stuart’s Boston.....	197
Self-Interest vs. “Disinterest”: Commerce, Virtue, and Portraiture as Public Relations.....	201
“Upon Stuart’s Easel”: The Three Faces of Sarah Morton and a Question of Order.....	208
Knowing One’s Audience: The Boston Portrait of Mrs. M.....	214
A Study in Scandal: The Winterthur Portrait of Mrs. M.....	219
“The Lines of Reason,”: “The Lines of Grace”: The Worcester Portrait of an American Woman of Ideas.....	225
Conclusion: Who’s Musing Whom?: The Sister Arts of Poetry and Painting in the Work of Morton and Stuart.....	234
Works Cited.....	241

## **A Revolutionary Idea: Gilbert Stuart Paints Sarah Morton as a Woman of Ideas**

### **Introduction**

E'en me, by thy enlivening grace array'd,  
Me, born to linger in Affliction's shade,  
Hast thou, kind artist, with attraction drest,  
With all that Nature in my soul express'd.  
Sarah Morton, 1803

These lines by American author Sarah Morton were written in honor of her portrait's completion and inscribed to the artist Gilbert Stuart, the foremost painter during the early republic. Her panegyric, "[T]o Mr. Stuart, On His Portrait of Mrs. M.," was printed in *Port Folio*. In neat neoclassic couplets, Morton extolled the painter's formidable artistic talents. And in what is thought to be the sole example of Stuart's lyric efforts, the artist responded in kind. The lack of literary evidence attributed to his hand, however, was not for lack of skills. If truth be told, the painter was the better poet. Stuart's courtly rejoinder was printed in the same 1803 issue of the *Port Folio*, a leading literary weekly published in Philadelphia by Joseph Dennie (1768-1820).

In these, his only published lines, titled simply "To Mrs. M . . .," Stuart mentioned Morton's "soft cheek" and "matchless charms"; however, he devoted equal attention to her nonphysical virtues. Stuart's laudatory verse read in part, "[T]was heaven itself that

blended in thy face/The lines of Reason with the lines of Grace." By emphasizing Morton's reason, Stuart offered a subtle corrective to Morton's assessment of her painted

image. According to her verse, Morton was evidently satisfied that the portrait expressed her physical likeness as well as her true nature—the painter, however, pointedly added reason to the inventory of endowments he sought to convey. Although “Mrs. M” was a renowned beauty and society hostess, Stuart presented her first as a woman of the mind and only secondarily as an object of beauty or exemplar of virtue—the conventional modes for eighteenth-century female representation. By electing to emphasize her “lines of Reason,” Stuart visualized a progressive and potentially controversial interpretation of his comely sitter, the lovely and learned Morton. In both this poem and his paintings of her, Stuart prioritized Morton’s life of the mind rather than her socially prescribed life in the world.

Stuart painted three portraits of Sarah Morton, each bearing the title “Mrs. Perez Morton.” For clarity, art historians refer to the individual paintings by the names of the institutions where the portraits reside. Hence, the names to which they will be referred throughout this study are the *Worcester*, *Winterthur*, and *Boston* portraits. Much mystery surrounds the sequence in which the artist created these three similar yet singular images of his friend Morton; the order of their execution is a point of some contention among Stuart scholars. The most conventional of the group, the Boston portrait, acts as counterpoint to the other two less easily classified portraits in this study. Stuart’s unorthodox Worcester painting is the most visually stirring of the group and has frequently been addressed by historians of eighteenth-century American portraiture. By contrast, the equally intriguing,

though—at first glance—less exotic, Winterthur likeness has received comparatively little critical attention.

This study reconstructs the circumstances by which Stuart composed the group of Morton portraits, accentuating the collaborative nature of their sittings, and with multifold aims. Such a particularized examination of three portraits of an individual subject contributes to Stuart scholarship by tracing the development of the artist as he moved from one major American city to the next—from his years in Philadelphia (1794-1803) to his move to Washington, D. C., in 1803 and finally to his relocation to 1805 Boston, where he would remain until his death in 1828. Though similar in appearance and painted within a few years of each other, Stuart's portraits of Morton achieve dramatically different effects. Additionally, the paintings served widely variant ends for both artist and sitter, revealing each to be more modernist actors than history has recorded for either. This reconstructive endeavor illuminates both the course and depth of the exceptional personal and professional relationship between Morton and Stuart, whose paths crossed at several historic junctures, while highlighting the interconnectivity of their work. Most significantly, the Stuart portraits represent an ideal lens through which to view Morton's life and work as well as to follow the Boston native's transformation into one of America's earliest women of ideas.

The poet and the painter likely first met in Philadelphia, in 1800, when Morton traveled from Boston to the federal capitol with her husband, Perez Morton. As a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives from Dorchester from 1800 to 1811, Mr.

Morton frequented Philadelphia and later Washington, D.C. Often accompanying him on these junkets, Mrs. Morton visited Philadelphia several times and she and Stuart socialized in the same circles. Stuart's painting rooms were located just outside the city, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, where it is certain that at least one of the Morton portraits was begun in 1800-01. Her sittings at the artist's studio produced remarkable portraits; however, their encounters also resulted in a creative and, in many ways, modern commercial alliance as well. These occasions further initiated a friendship distinguished by both deep respect and affection between Morton and Stuart, who would ultimately come to view one another as kindred spirits. Serving as mutual muses, they were each artistically inspired by the other until old age. Stuart appeared frequently in Morton's writings, underscoring the intensity of their connection. Art historians have not fully explored the relationship between the painter and the poet—one that I contend was born of shared experiences of personal tragedy and similar sensibilities of both the heart and mind.

Though largely known for his fine portraits of male republican venerables—including each of the first five presidents, which earned him the appellation "Painter of American Kings"—Stuart's representations of women are, at times, equally fascinating. Of that group of male luminaries, Stuart's sensitive portrait of the aging President John Adams, painted in 1826 when Adams was ninety, is especially fine. Describing their sittings, Adams wrote that "no penance is like having one's picture done"; nevertheless, delighted in his time with Stuart. He continued further, "I should like to sit to Stuart from

the first of January to the last of December, for he lets me do just as I please and keeps me constantly amused by his conversation.” As averred by Adams, Stuart was a legendary conversationalist who could engage even the most reticent of sitters. However Stuart did not reserve his best work—or discourse—for male subjects alone. As for Morton, she could hold her own. An accomplished writer of poetry and prose whom David S. Shields has called the “most famous New England salonniere of her day,” Morton, too, was applauded for her lively discourse. From the “sky parlor” of her Dudley Street manor in Dorchester, designed by her first cousin, the noted architect Charles Bulfinch, Morton hosted lavish affairs. Guests at “Morton Pavilion” included the likes of John and Abigail Adams and Gouverneur Morris, the American ambassador to France, as well as visiting emissaries from international locales. Those in attendance engaged in spirited discussions about the arts, culture, and politics of the day.

As choreographer of the evening’s events, Morton directed the conversation toward both the theoretical philosophical topics that captivated Enlightenment-era thinkers as well as the practical political concerns of everyday life in the republic—issues such as manumission, Native American matters, and women’s rights. Morton’s salon style was distinctive and decidedly American, merging the model of the socially conscious British “bluestocking” with the sophistication and refinement suggestive of French *salonniere*.

Morton would have had little problem entertaining Gilbert Stuart during sittings. Stuart, who talked constantly while painting, had garnered acclaim for both his wit and his

breadth of knowledge. However, he had an equally well-documented reputation for grandiloquence and repetitiveness as well as a tendency to sacrifice veracity for comedy. Morton at times assumed a sardonic, even ironic, posture that, while not readily apparent in her published work, was striking in her private musings as well as some public writings from late in life. Likewise, Stuart's seemingly sober republican portraits oftentimes upon closer scrutiny share a similar proto-modernist impulse, albeit in a visual format, in their expressionism and emphatic brushwork. He likely appreciated Morton's cerebral gifts as much as her more obvious physical attributes.

The life and memory of Stuart's muse were marked by both tragedy and triumph. As a private individual—sister, wife, mother—she weathered the early deaths of children and a domestic scandal that would have sent many women into seclusion. The publicized revelation of her humiliation sullied her reputation for the rest of her life. As a public figure, the well-connected and widely published Morton commented freely on contemporary political, moral, and social matters during the years of the nascent republic. If women writers were barred from participation in the political and civic discourse of the “public sphere,” Morton was in no way deterred by the exclusion. Her literary ambition and ongoing quest to find a voice are emblematic of the emergence in America, toward the end of the century, of an increasing awareness of the implications of authorship.

In her compelling study, *Women and Authorship in Revolutionary America*, Angela Vietto proposes a challenge to the critical commonplace in American literary history that

women writers were in a constant battle against a literary world that denied them access based on their gender. Vietto makes a strong case that although the “separate spheres” ideology affected women in direct ways, the question of “whether or not women [writers] were transgressing socially prescribed boundaries” is not so easily explained by the “women’s sphere” conceptual category. Many historians representing an array of disciplines have noted that in eighteenth-century America, such rhetorical constructions were fluid, not necessarily representations of static practical reality. Since many women writers, including Morton, Judith Sargent Murray, and Mercy Otis Warren in Boston alone, were avidly writing and steadily finding venues for their work, it is reasonable to presume that women throughout the republic were more active participants in the public sphere and civic and political discourse than has previously been acknowledged.

Both Morton and Stuart were at once ahead of their time and utterly representative of the era. Stuart’s paintings of Morton reflect this duality—most emphatically the powerful Worcester portrait, which represents the apogee of the series. Though this portrait, routinely described by art historians as a *tour-de-force*, is reproduced often in Stuart catalogs and monographs, and typically accompanied by quotations from their poetic exchange, the painting has been treated only superficially by art historians. Indeed, it has rarely been noted that the pair of poems frequently referenced alongside the Worcester was more likely composed in commemoration of the Winterthur. Such inattention to detail, along with the neglect of the influence of Morton and Stuart’s long-term friendship on his



paintings of the writer, undermines the radical impact of the now-famed Worcester portrait. With this portrait, Stuart produced an intimate and highly personalized rendering as well as a controversial public display. With the lesser-known Winterthur example, the artist and sitter conspired to advertise Stuart's impression—and his services—on the pages of *Port Folio*.

Stuart approached the fairly conventional Boston portrait in a manner that typified female portraiture of the era and ultimately calls attention to the more unusual properties of the other two Morton paintings. In the Boston example, she is shown as a prosperous, modest wife and woman of letters seated at her writing desk, with pen and inkwell at her fingertips against a dark background. Stuart's less-traditional treatment of his friend in the Winterthur version also depicts her as an author; however, her neckline is significantly more plunging, her hairstyle more alluring, her jewelry more abundant, lending a provocative air to the portrait as a whole. Additionally, the artist has painted in a bust of Washington above her shoulder—a sculpture that appears in no other Stuart portrait. The complex imagery suggests many intriguing visual and philosophical possibilities and illustrates well his versatility as an artist.

Stuart's sensual and evocative handling of the Worcester portrayal marks another departure from convention. His Romantic rendering of Morton's disembodied head shows her in an unprecedented pose for female portraiture of the era—both arms raised as she lifts a veil from her head. Morton rather floats against a luminous, almost evanescent,

background. The cumulative effect of the three Morton portraits presents a revolutionary visualization of the intellectuality of his scandal-besieged female sitter while hinting at something deeply private behind the veil that shrouds his friend's painted head. When viewed together, the trio can be read as Stuart's ongoing endeavor to capture the character of his confidante Sarah Morton as a woman of ideas. In doing so, he placed her on par with the men of her day who inhabited a life of the mind.

One such man of letters was their mutual friend Joseph Dennie. Among the most influential editors and critics in the early republic, he was both an intimate of Morton and an admirer and promoter of Stuart. With the publication of their companion poems, Dennie orchestrated a calculated public relations maneuver on behalf of Morton and Stuart.

Dennie, who wrote under many pseudonyms over the course of his career, styled himself as "Samuel Saunter," or "The American Lounger." His 1803 issue of *Port Folio* opened *in medias res*, with Saunter recounting his delight upon the accidental discovery of two poems only moments before the weekly was going to press. According to his literary fiction, Saunter just happened to be engaged in a feeble attempt to describe one Stuart portrait of Morton—a "Lady whose rank is high in the Monarchy of Letters"—and the "peculiar merit of the artist" when an associate fortuitously interrupted him with their two manuscripts. After perusing them, the editor immediately ceased his own efforts, as the poems themselves could "supersede every thing that such a Lounger could say." Saunter accordingly printed "with alacrity" the poems by Morton and Stuart, examples of what he

characterized as “genius decorating Art, and Poetry beautifying her sister.”

The pendant poems functioned on a variety of levels. At its most fundamental, the poetic exchange is a literary memorial to the enduring affection between Morton and Stuart, who became lifelong friends as a result of these sittings. However, their poetic lays operated beyond merely the commemorative plane. In another respect, the pair of poems is revelatory of contemporary notions of the nature of the muse in artistic inspiration. The artist/muse dynamic that originated during antiquity was revisited throughout the eighteenth century by writers and painters alike as part of the overall Neoclassical movement. According to this ancient paradigm, women are supposed to inspire art, not create it. Stuart’s articulation of Morton’s reason in his verse challenged this classical construction.

Moreover, in addition to the emblematic function of the two poems themselves, their appearance on the pages of *Port Folio* served a commercial purpose. In what was a premeditated published exchange—the “Lounger’s” effusions aside—Stuart, Morton, and Dennie colluded in a savvy public relations strategy. Dennie, via the cognomen Samuel Saunter, provided the platform for what was a joint effort on the part of painter and sitter to boost one another’s reputations, both personally and professionally. Saunter’s adulatory preface to their work, in tandem with the poems and Morton portraits, served both to advertise Stuart as an eminent portraitist and to galvanize Morton’s status as an accomplished woman of letters. The duo craftily manipulated their mutual public personae, reinforcing Stuart’s image as artistic genius and Morton’s as a woman of ideas.

Through their verse the two complimented one another, according to the poetic conventions of the times, each modestly deferring to the superiority of the other's talent and chosen medium. Morton equated Stuart's brush to a "magician's wand," dubbing the artist himself the "friend of Genius." Stuart answered by comparing painting with "[p]oesy that gift divine," and pronouncing "how poor, how impotent is mine." As was conventional in eighteenth-century poetry about paintings, Morton's hyperbolic verse granted Stuart the ability to give life through his work, declaring, "'Tis character that breathes, 'tis soul that twines/Round the rich canvass[sic], traced in living lines." As part of republican popular culture, and largely based upon English prototypes, American poets often chose artists and their paintings as their subject matter. Morton and Stuart were assuredly acquainted with the practice, and Morton had previously, in 1793, penned a poem to friend and history painter John Trumbull.

In a similar fashion to Stuart's accent on Morton's reason, her poetic emphasis on his character acknowledged the painter's preoccupation with expressing the very essence, or character, of his sitters. Stuart, who left many portraits seemingly unfinished, generally "concentrated on depicting character in faces, and tended to throw everything else overboard." To the chagrin of his expectant patrons, Stuart may well have abandoned canvases when he considered the commission to be finished—that is, once he had captured their true character. More than a few crestfallen sitters left the artist's studio empty-handed.

When Stuart assayed to paint the character of his muse, he captured on canvas not

only her face but also her mind: the part of the body most closely aligned with reason. Through his group of compositions, Stuart exposed the inadequacy of the classical construction of the artist/muse dynamic in an enlightened democracy. Herein lay the dilemma: how does the muse, traditionally constructed as feminine and whom Morton herself regularly invoked, function for a woman of letters in the American republic? This matter was further complicated during an era when women writers (or women of any vocation) were not accorded the same capacity for reason as their male counterparts.

Stuart painted Morton during a moment when the question of whether women had the capacity for reason, with a capital “R,” was roundly contested, when democratic participation was premised on one’s ability to reason, and when the possession of reason—which was identified with genteel masculinity—was a prerequisite for citizenship. With each of his portraits of Morton, Stuart answered the question in the affirmative. For American women, the debate surrounding their ability to think rationally had legal, political, and social ramifications as well as implications within the family. The trio of Morton portraits can be read as Stuart’s meditation on this increasingly glaring hypocrisy in American republican ideology. Particularly in his disarming *Worcester* portrait, and to a lesser degree the *Winterthur*, the apparently politically neutral Stuart created a visual representation of the gender—or *sex*, as was the terminology of the times—dilemma faced by early republican intellectuals. If they genuinely believed in universal humanity, in the natural equality of all human beings, how then were they to conceptualize human difference

among the races, the classes, and—most germane to this study— between the sexes?

Stuart, who disdained the idea of worldly rank and bourgeois hypocrisy of any sort, grappled with the *woman question* throughout his depictions of Morton. The result is a truly revolutionary progression of paintings; the consequence, perhaps, was the first portrait of an American woman of ideas.

As a concept, the woman of ideas was not a new one during the eighteenth century. The typology had existed in Europe, most specifically France, for centuries; however, the phrase has rarely been applied to American female intellectuals of any period. In her study of the French *femme savant* in art, Janis Bergman-Carton describes the woman of ideas as a figure “principally identified by her contemporaries (satirically or not) as an intellectual being who recognizes and uses the power of words to influence public opinion.” This characterization aptly describes Sarah Morton while placing her in direct opposition to her foil, the “woman of accomplishments.”

In the last decades of the eighteenth century in Britain and in America, the model of the woman of accomplishments emerged as a socially acceptable manner for middle- and upper-class women to display their refined talents. Accomplishments such as musical training, painting, needlework, and a proficiency in foreign languages became critical social attributes for women in polite society. These attainments, though rarely of the intellectual variety, provided women with the opportunity to perform before a live audience, but only in domestic surroundings, and were likely to secure a proposal of marriage. By contrast, the

less-superficial, more-interior qualities of the woman of ideas were not readily apparent upon cursory inspection. This challenge to easy categorization did not bode well for female intellectuals as the eighteenth-century mind tended to prefer self-explanatory external signifiers, especially as they applied to women. Consequently, thinking women such as Morton were generally viewed as anomalous, exceptional. I will employ Bergman-Carton's model of the woman of ideas throughout this study while refining the concept for its applications to the American scene.

In the years following the Revolution, particularly in metropolitan centers like Philadelphia or Boston, everyday life was marked by an uncertainty and anxiousness about the future that found expression in the visual as well as the literary arts of the period. Political leaders, intellectuals, and artists alike shared a concern about the foundation of a national identity suitable for a virtuous republic and its citizenry. This was an era when one's reputation and public image were matters of grave import and much public debate. Stuart's portraits and Morton's writings, particularly on relations between the sexes, could each be subtly satirical. Strong personalities both, Morton and Stuart were influential contributors to national discussions, commenting upon and criticizing, if often in a veiled manner, the self-importance and self-absorption they saw as increasingly characteristic of republican America and their fellow writers and artists. The late-eighteenth-century preoccupation with the private self, and its conflict with the public face one assumes for popular consumption, became a virtual obsession by the early years of the next century.

Throughout her writings, Morton, always seeming a spectator of her own life, returned regularly to this contemporary dichotomy as she struggled to define her individual sense of public and private selfhood. Though stylistically Morton's work was typical of the era, in her content and experimentation with multiple voices, she was more experimental and, occasionally, radical. Chapter one, "Her Mind and Its Thoughts: The Many Veils of Mrs. Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton," introduces Morton as a child of privilege born into Boston's pre-Revolutionary aristocracy and addresses her childhood and early education in the republican stronghold of Braintree, Massachusetts. With educated and supportive parents, Morton was fortunate to be exposed to arts of both the literary and visual varieties that set her on course for a life of the mind. Additionally, I will contextualize her distinctly American salon style as well as her participation in republican manuscript culture as the concepts relate specifically to the woman-of-ideas abstraction, an idea that will be developed over the course of this study. It is important to bear in mind that, like the doctrine of separate spheres, the woman-of-ideas typology is fundamentally an ideological construct rather than a mirror of the practical realities of the lives of learned women in the American republic.

Over the course of Morton's development as a woman who writes, her relationship to the woman-of-ideas category exhibited multiple manifestations, as did the writer's relationship with her own name. Beginning in girlhood and prior to her writing career, Morton had a predilection for adopting a variety of signatures. The permutations of her



given name and her choice of literary pseudonyms often mirrored her situation and her mood at various life stages. Morton consistently experimented with renaming, and, for a range of professional and personal reasons, she attired herself in many veils.

For example, in the aftermath of a publicized quarrel with another writer, Judith Sargent Murray, over the usage of the pen name “Constantia” and the public disclosure of a life-altering scandal in 1789, Morton took on the *nom de plume* “Philenia, A Lady of Boston.” The optimism of that year, which had marked the consolidation of the American republic, initiated for Morton a gradual smoldering death: the onset of the sense of despondency that she would carry with her for the rest of her life. Morton’s dashing lawyer husband Perez had been exposed for seducing her younger sister, Fanny Apthorp, who was living with the Mortons in Boston to assist in the care of the couple’s children. The affair, which I will refer to as the Morton-Apthorp scandal throughout this study, resulted in the birth of a child as well as Fanny’s subsequent suicide by ingesting poison.

Chapter two, “Keeping Up Appearances: The Public Face, the Printed Word, and the Spectacle of the Private,” examines the significance of personal reputation during the years of the early republic as expressed through the rapidly expanding print culture, a medium in which Morton was a major player and in which such ideals were actively debated. Her highly visible role in the public conversation regarding the attributes most suitable for the citizens of an ideal republic was formative for Morton’s fashioning of her public image as a woman of ideas.

The mounting influence of print culture in what was quickly becoming a “republic of letters” is addressed throughout the chapter. The open exchange of ideas and the radicalization of public discourse born during the Revolutionary era brought about a transformation of the public sphere—from, as Michael Warner explains, a world in which “power embodied in special persons [was] represented before the people” to a model in which power was constituted through the dynamic nature of discourse itself. During the years of the republic, citizenship was accorded to individuals through their participation in political/public discourse as readers and/or writers, forever altering the relationship between people and power. Literacy rates in America—largely fueled by the centrality of reading to the Protestant faith—far surpassed those in Europe. Basic reading and writing skills were prerequisites for community participation in any public conversation during America’s early years. Such educational fundamentals both enriched and energized contemporary political and civic discourse, giving voice to the concerns of a diverse and multifaceted population.

At the same time, the maturation of modern capitalism throughout much of western Europe as well as in America opened up the marketplace for much-sought-after printed materials. Lofty visions of the open and free exchange of ideas long associated with the enlightened times were accompanied by a baser transaction—the open and free exchange of consumer commodities. Each of these factors—one ideological, the other material—set in motion the simultaneous construction and dissolution of the separate-spheres dialectic. In

turn, the ever-expanding print culture instigated an erosion of the barriers between the public and private spheres. A similar breakdown was gradually beginning to apply to state, national, and international boundaries as well. Further, the disintegration of interior and exterior worlds fomented public interest in all things sensational, ushering in an era marked by a fascination with scandal and gossip and breathing new life into trial and crime reportage. A salacious impulse was rampant during the years between the Revolutionary War and the establishment of nationhood, and few public figures could escape its reach. Sarah Morton and her family experienced the propensity for the scandalous firsthand.

Morton, a high-profile writer, saw a painful personal tragedy played out in the popular press—her domestic calumny was documented on the pages of local newspapers and consumed voraciously by Boston’s new reading public. Morton’s real-life drama rivaled the steamy storylines of that brand of scandalous fiction. Indeed, to make matters worse, a sentimental novel, *The Power of Sympathy: Or, the Triumph of Nature, Founded in Truth* (1789), contained a thinly disguised subplot mirroring the scandal; its publication in epistolary format ensured that “gentle readers” would be breathlessly awaiting each scintillating installment. Morton was long assumed to be the author of this book, considered the first novel written in America, though she was not. Unfortunately for the already publicly abashed writer, *The Power of Sympathy* was not the only contemporary text in which the Morton-Apthorp scandal, or Morton herself, appeared in fictionalized form. She made more than a few reluctant literary cameos in the thriving print culture of

late eighteenth-century Boston. These various texts, avidly read in their day, are examined in chapters two and three.

Chapter three, “Revolutionary Liaisons and Strategic Alliances: Morton’s Public Relations and the Making of an American Woman of Ideas,” further explores the disintegrating boundaries between the public and private spheres during the last decades of the century, especially Morton’s strategy for traversing the tricky terrain. Feminine virtue was one of the most vociferously debated subjects in the popular press, particularly regarding the modes of acceptable public display for women in a democratic republic. Of all the arts, portraiture, with its emphasis on exteriority and on appearances of public virtue, perhaps dealt with this issue most directly. Stuart’s contrary nature and his pointedly unconventional renderings of Morton make clear his opinions on the matter.

As both participants in and subjects of this vocal public discussion, Morton and other women writers in the republic confronted special challenges to their perceptions of both individuality and subjectivity, contriving multiple solutions. Chapter three chronicles Morton’s conscious reinvention of her public image as an American woman of ideas, a transformation she accomplished through her negotiation of both the public social sphere and the pseudo-public sphere of manuscript culture, a rather circumstantial manipulation of her authorial position, and her shrewd management of strategic alliances. However, some of Morton’s contemporaries disapproved of both her singular brand of public relations and the salon style she cultivated in the “sky parlor” of her Dorchester mansion. Chapter three

explores Morton's various public liaisons, wise and unwise, and their varying degrees of success.

One not-so-strategic partnership, from a public relations perspective, was with Gouverneur Morris, the urbane ambassador to France. From Morton's point of view, their illicit liaison may have offered more than simply carnal satisfaction. Her widely whispered-of affair with the rakish Morris was, in part, Morton's semi-public revenge against her duplicitous husband. In spite of his wooden leg, Morris was admired for his statuesque frame, so much so that French sculptor Houdon enlisted the American ambassador to France to model for his famous bust of George Washington. Strikingly, Stuart alluded to Morris through the Winterthur painting of Morton, in which Houdon's statue of Washington peers over her shoulder. The Frenchman's version of Washington is the only likeness that Stuart thought superior to his own Athenaeum head and may be an example of his pictorial sense of humor.

Both Morton and Stuart were the objects of gossip during their lifetimes—Stuart for his proclivity for drinking Madeira and taking snuff and for his impecuniousness and general dissipation. Though rumors about the idle amusements of the eminent portraitist had little effect on his commissions, Morton was not so fortunate—a factor that enhanced the sympathetic component of their relationship. Chapter five, “Lifting the Veil of the Enigmatic Mrs. M.: America's First Painted Woman of Ideas,” addresses the subject of the visual arts and American identity as it explores Stuart's formative role in the invention of a

national visual vernacular. In addition, the chapter contextualizes portraiture as the dominant artistic genre during the republican years, introducing the conventions of eighteenth-century portrait painting. Chiefly emphasizing traditional modes of female representation, this section discusses Stuart's translation of the genre, long steeped in European tradition, to American tastes and revolutionary times.

Chapter four most fully investigates Stuart's exceptional Morton portraits, particularly the Worcester and the comparatively critically ignored Winterthur versions. Each of Stuart's images of Morton speaks to and about the others, commenting, revealing, and at times concealing the character of the woman beneath the veil. Close readings of the portraits, along with an examination of the considerable writings by Morton either inscribed to or alluding to Stuart and his work, yield compelling findings and interrelationships. While situating the pair in the dynamic atmosphere of the world's first modern republic, this endeavor serves to confirm and expand upon the singular connection between the artist and his muse. Long thought to be one among an endless stream of illustrious callers who passed through Stuart's painting rooms, Sarah Morton proved an invaluable source of patronage, friendship, and intellectual exchange for the mercurial painter. Most significantly, Morton was Stuart's muse for one of the most unusual and arresting eighteenth-century female portraits ever painted.

## Chapter One

### Her Mind and Its Thoughts: The Many Veils of Mrs. Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton

*Sweet Hamlet!* To thy breast of bloom  
In singleness of soul I come!  
The aching of my cares to hide,  
And dead to all that breathe beside.  
For in thy bounties thou art kind,  
To the world-wearied nerve of mind;  
And most to her who dares not own,  
How much she feels in crowds alone.  
—Sarah Morton, 1823

The longer poem “Rustic Lines, upon returning to the beloved hamlet of Dorchester,” from which this stanza is drawn, was Sarah Morton’s opening selection for her last published work, released in 1823, with the evocative title *My Mind and Its Thoughts, in sketches, fragment, and essays*. This highly personal compilation of poetry and prose was comprehensive in both style and subject, containing some previously published and often reworked poems in addition to new work commemorating national and local events. Morton’s essays and prose pieces addressed an array of topics—including physiognomy, the insidious nature of gossip, embittered musings on marriage and the sexes, odes to adversity and disappointment, heated discussions of jealousy and vanity, and incisive analyses of ancient history and contemporary philosophy—all of which Morton took great care to arrange. With a logic only she understood, the aging writer categorized each of her entries as *thoughts*, *essays*, *poetry*, *characteristic songs*, or *paradoxes*,

organizing the pieces, it appears, according to their personal significance or thematic similarities rather than chronologically, and the entries are rarely accompanied by dates. More compelling than her unconventional arrangement, however, was the debut of a number of intimate writings that Morton had previously withheld from public view. In the painstaking annotation accompanying those precious pieces, Morton provided elliptical explanations for the timing of their appearance, often generating more questions than answers.

Publishing by subscription, Morton [dangling modifier] used the signature Sarah Wentworth Morton, electing to drop her maiden name (Apthorp) and assume Wentworth (her mother's maiden name)—only one example of her experimental nomenclature. Indeed, her life and her work can be read as a prolonged exercise in self-naming. Morton's continual quest for an authorial voice, exemplified by her propensity for literary reinvention, is likewise illustrative of her persistent pursual of selfhood. In the only published work that Morton ever signed *sans nom de plume*, the prominent positioning of these “rustic lines” on page one is suggestive of their significance to her as emblematic of her life and work.

When this compilation was released, Morton, hailed in her prime as the “American Sappho,” was sixty-four years old, well beyond the apex of her writing career and decades since scandalous revelations of marital infidelity and filial suicide had been exposed. However, she never quite recovered from the sting of public betrayal. Morton's salient



closing lines in this poem, “And most to her who dares not own/How much she feels in crowds alone” encapsulate well the paradox that was her life while at the same time implicitly establishing her as an isolated (private) individual in opposition to (public) society. Morton long felt underappreciated for what she believed were her significant contributions to the public discourse about an American national identity. There has recently been a renewed interest in Sarah Morton’s poetry, particularly the long patriotic poem *Beacon Hill: A Local Poem, Historic and Descriptive* (1797) and her 1790 play *Ouâbi: or the Virtues of Nature. An Indian Tale in Four Cantos*. Her work is increasingly anthologized in collections of early American literature, and her name is regularly found on American literature course syllabi in universities across the country as well as in Europe.

As an active participant in the era’s vibrant print and manuscript culture as well as a leader in Boston salon society, Morton freely voiced her informed opinions, secure in the belief that the nation—as represented by her influential coterie—was listening. Ultimately, however, she was disappointed in the public and private spheres alike. A profound sense of alienation, her “singleness of soul,” is palpable throughout much of Morton’s final work. With the publication of *My Mind and Its Thoughts*, the once-triumphant author, who so captivated the fabled brush of Gilbert Stuart that the great artist painted her portrait three times, left little doubt that she had indeed become “dead to all that breathe inside.”

Inspired “upon returning to the beloved hamlet of Dorchester,” where Morton lived on the exclusive Dudley Street with her husband Perez and family from around 1808 until

his death in 1837, she likely composed her “rustic lines” in the latter years of her life.

Throughout Morton’s writing career of more than fifty years, she regularly envisioned Dorchester as her one safe harbor in an otherwise ill-fated existence: “I come—beneath those shades to rest/And in that quiet to be blest.” Morton rhapsodized about the “[h]ome of [her] heart” well into old age, writing that the “whole of life rest[ed] here.”

Romantic in tone, the verse exposed Morton’s disillusionment with a society—and husband—that she felt had forsaken her. The disenchanted writer concluded *My Mind and Its Thoughts* with a disingenuous “Apology”; however, Morton issued no apology of any kind. To the contrary, she took the opportunity to air her grievances, summarizing her life experiences as a “series of disappointments, with distress, cruelly aggravated” by the premature death of young children. She continued in this rather morose, matter-of-fact tone while adding her present condition to the litany of tribulations. At the (almost literally) bitter end, this founding American woman of ideas was left with nothing more than that “stagnation of heart” and “pulsation of brain” that preceded the “most deplorable of human miseries.” Morton traversed this solitary landscape throughout much of her later work.

A once-spirited and highly visible republican salonniere who was a fixture of the political and literary scene in and around Boston, the aging Morton resigned herself to unceremonious irrelevance. Throughout her lifetime, Morton had been the subject of gossip and innuendo, and though privately she had never felt genuinely secure with her status, she finally publicly acknowledged “how much she feels in crowds alone.” The

baleful title, *My Mind and Its Thoughts*, dramatized her position as a disembodied outsider, a spectator of her own mind, even of her own thoughts. At the very end, Morton cared little about conveying the appearance of a negative public image. Entitled “Response Courteous to Question Imperious,” Morton’s introduction to the volume struck a blithely confrontational tone, directly addressing her audience as the “gentle reader, perhaps the ungente critic, perhaps the unsparing artist,” impetuously inquiring of them, “and what are your thoughts like? or what are they worth?” Morton’s mordant last words to the American reading public, and at last published under her own name, were—for the first time—punctuated by a disregard for the opinion of others.

### **In Pursuit of a Name: Morton’s Early Life as Simply Sarah Apthorp**

If as an adult Morton cast herself in the role of a misunderstood Byronic heroine, the picture she painted of her childhood could not have been more antithetical. Her vast writings on the topic re-created an environment that was ideal for a curious child with literary proclivities. The third of ten children born between 1756 and 1775, Morton was baptized simply Sarah Apthorp at Boston’s King’s Chapel in August 1759. However, in an unorthodox flourish, while still a girl, she assumed her mother’s surname, Wentworth, deciding to name herself Sarah Wentworth Apthorp. The youthful expression of self-naming was likely motivated by family pride; however, when placed in the context of Morton’s lifelong preoccupation with name-changing, the gesture takes on added weight. Though not yet a public figure, the young Apthorp approximated a public posture through

this individualistic act, announcing to an implied audience that she was a person of consequence connected with not one but two exceptional families. Always an independent thinker, Morton used this assumed name when she signed her marriage certificate, thereby superimposing a legal stamp of authenticity upon her chosen name.

Morton spent her early childhood in Boston, where her family lived with her paternal grandparents in what was locally known as the “Apthorp Mansion.” Occupying a coveted corner of King (now State) Street and Exchange Lane, the impressive edifice was a recognized landmark in town and a residence befitting the Apthorps’ station—he a prosperous merchant, she a patrician wife of aristocratic lineage. As colonial “Paymaster and contractor for the Royal Army and Navy,” Morton’s grandfather, the enterprising Charles Apthorp (1698-1758), built his fortune privateering and provisioning British forces and then built the “Mansion” with the proceeds. When Apthorp died, Portsmouth’s *New Hampshire Gazette* wrote of his “leaving a widow and numerous offspring” and called him the “greatest merchant on the continent.”

Charles’s father (Morton’s great-grandfather) was East Apthorp of Wales, a man with cultivated tastes and more than a passing penchant for the arts and architecture. At the end of the seventeenth century he migrated to England, where he was successful enough to send Charles to Eton. After his father’s death Charles Apthorp moved to Boston, where he met and, in 1726, married Grizell Eastwick—the grandmother Morton was so proud to emulate—and subsequently built Apthorp Mansion. The thriving and quickly multiplying

couple put every inch of their grand manor to use. Morton's grandmother, whom she revered, gave birth to seventeen children while in that home. Their fourth, James Apthorp (1731-1799), sired the famous writer and salonniere Sarah Apthorp Morton.

Morton's maternal line was similarly august. Her mother, Sarah Wentworth (1735-1820), was the daughter of Samuel Wentworth, a Boston merchant whose father was New Hampshire Lieutenant Governor John Wentworth (1671-1730) and whose grandfather, Benning Wentworth (1696-1770), was the first royal governor of the colony of New Hampshire. Establishing Portsmouth as their family seat, the distinguished Wentworth family traced its British heritage to the earls of Stratford. Morton's adventurous grandfather, Samuel Wentworth, who had initially charted a seafaring course for himself, became a captain in 1708 and eventually parlayed his success at sea into sizable treasures on land. At Portsmouth, Wentworth did considerable business as a merchant and held several public offices: counselor, justice of the Court of Common Pleas, and eventually lieutenant governor, a position he held until his death in 1730.

Morton was proud of both her Welsh and English stock, as evidenced by her insistence on being addressed by both names. At times, her affection verged on idolatry, and throughout her literary endeavors she dedicated poem after reverential poem to her forebears. However, Boston was always her home, and she could not have been more American in outlook. With divided loyalties, Morton, like so many of her generation and social standing who were born into prerevolutionary American aristocracy, espoused

political views that were at odds with those of her loyalist parents and grandparents.

Despite the fact that she steadfastly identified herself with her heritage, Morton was not simply sympathetic with the revolutionary cause—she embraced democratic principles wholeheartedly.

In this respect, the Apthorp household was not unique. Division on the subject of independence within families, and among generations, was not uncommon. At least two of Morton's brothers disagreed with her prorevolution stance. Charles and Samuel Apthorp sided with the British, and both served in the royal forces—one in the army, the other the navy. Dinner conversations among the educated and impassioned members of the clan housed at Apthorp Mansion, and later at Morton's father's Braintree estate, would have been both informed and energetic. The world of the Apthorps was never dull, and the precocious Sarah Apthorp took full advantage of her propitious circumstances. Their living quarters remained commodious and densely populated while expansive in ideas, her enlightened upbringing the perfect training ground for a future salonniere and woman of letters.

### **Putting a Face to a Name: Framing Morton's History Through American Portraiture**

The Apthorps all lived in high style. Morton's grandparents' manse on King Street was extravagantly well appointed, an attribute Morton later recalled in verse. She remembered the foursquare brick residence as the "scene of every elegance," with a "stately

dome” crowning this “mansion of yore” and luxurious “beds [which were] curtained in velvet.” An especially appealing feature for Sarah Apthorp, and formative in her eventual manifestation as a woman of ideas, was the voluminous library where she whiled away many hours poring over tomes on all manner of subjects. Gilt frames holding portraits of her glorious ancestors lined the library walls—the Apthorps, of course, commissioned the finest artists available. In addition to the Sir Peter Lely portrait of Morton’s great-great-grandmother, about which Morton later remarked that “this portrait is distinguished by the long dark eyes, which that artist preferred and made fashionable,” young Sarah Apthorp could have gazed with admiration at the monumental portraits of her grandparents by American painter Robert Feke (c. 1707-1752). Feke was popular during the 1740s, and when the artist passed through Boston, Charles Apthorp commissioned him to portray his likeness as well as that of his wife and eldest daughter. The colonial face painter depicted Apthorp as the very essence of mercantile success and provincial prominence. His sitter is richly dressed and supremely confident. Feke’s splendid portrait of Apthorp’s wife, *Grizell Eastwick Apthorp* (c.1748), is among his most successful pieces. Though Morton’s grandmother’s features are rendered in a fairly generalized manner, her costume and accessories are sumptuously detailed, the artist clearly emphasizing her wealth, style, and elevated social standing.

The Wentworths, too, were preserved on canvas for the benefit of future generations. On trips to visit her maternal grandparents in Portsmouth, Morton

encountered other examples of fine works of art painted in America, in this case memorializing her English lineage. There, the probably English-born portraitist Joseph Blackburn (active, c. 1752-1777) had captured the likenesses of both her grandfather and great-grandfather, John and Benning Wentworth. For those like the Apthorps and Wentworths who could afford formal portraits, the paintings functioned, as Margareta Lovell explains, as “documents of the family line in operation, of the rules being followed, of chaos and litigation avoided, of family acquiescence to a new order in the all-important arena of money.” It should be added that formal portraits participated in the new commercial arena, as well as the private domestic realm, through their reinforcement of the separate-spheres construct of public/male and private/female avenues to authority and power. Through the portrayal of male subjects standing upright and surrounded by emblems of their worldly success and, by contrast, women generally seated and in domestic settings, portraiture reminded its viewers of the status quo. Such portraits adorned the walls of Sarah Apthorp’s youth, granting her a hands-on introduction to American visual culture. She was deeply impressed by the overall effect.

Morton’s early and easy access to paintings contributed both to the awe-inspired manner in which she always wrote of her heritage and of the comprehensive education that enabled her not merely to converse gracefully but also to engage actively with noted intellectuals of her era. Her youthful exposure to the arts, to portraiture most specifically, was of signal importance in the writer’s own pursuit of a name—the combination of image



(the portraits) and word (their subjects' names) allowed Morton to "put a name to a face."

Morton's writing reveals a preoccupation with the dynamic between her family heritage, or group identity, and her contemporary sense of self, or individuality. In an early composition, she distilled this concern with selfhood in "Lines to the mansion of my ancestors." The poem closed with thoughts about the bearing of its occupants, but the young writer also noted the gifts and talents of her forebears, recalling, "Thy sons approved in arts or arms/Thy daughters of transcendent charms." In her own generation, with success in the literary arts as well as her notable physical attractions, Morton could safely affix her accomplishments as well as her name to those of her ancestors—male and female.

### **Educating Sarah: The Accomplishments of Sarah Wentworth Apthorp**

Sometime between 1768 and 1770, when daughter Sarah was about ten, James Apthorp—who by then commanded a flourishing mercantile business—inherited a tract of land from his father, and the family moved to its Braintree estate. In this rather rarefied world, on the road from Plymouth to Boston, the aspiring writer remained until adulthood. The village of Braintree was the family seat of the Adams, Quincy, and Hancock families. For Braintree residents, social and political prominence literally came with the territory, as did a revolutionary sensibility. The community was one of the most active seats of the rebellion, and residents viewed as suspect those even loosely connected with Toryism. Though Morton's father was well liked, even popular, his and his family's perceived loyalty to the British motherland for a time overshadowed

whatever genuine affection his powerful neighbors had for him.

His brother, the Reverend East Apthorp, Jr., was well known because of his post as rector of the Episcopal Church in Cambridge. Sarah's influential uncle trespassed upon the spiritual ground of many Presbyterian and Congregationalist leaders through his role in the mounting Mayhew-Apthorp controversy (1763-65), a "pamphlet war" that arose over Apthorp's advocacy of the secret establishment of an American episcopate. Many New Englanders, such as Jonathan Mayhew, saw this proposition as an "ecclesiastical conspiracy against American liberties." In addition to having an Episcopalian clergyman in the family, one of Morton's uncles, Thomas Apthorp, had succeeded his father as royal paymaster of the British forces in Boston. As the eldest son, Thomas had inherited Apthorp Mansion in the late 1760s, only to have it forcibly removed sometime before 1777. The seizure of the cherished Apthorp Mansion in retribution for his loyalism was a blow to the entire family. At the outset of the Revolution, both of Sarah's uncles, East and Thomas, evacuated to the security of England. And though her father was never officially censured for Tory loyalties and ultimately maintained the respect of his more radical-minded neighbors, the fact that two of James Apthorp's sons were officers fighting for the king's forces did little to abate local cynicism about his dedication to the revolutionary cause.

Daughter Sarah nonetheless thrived among Braintree's patriot population and, as she grew into adulthood, came to adopt many of the insurgent and often incendiary

positions espoused by the leaders of her community. Throughout her time at Braintree, Morton studied boundlessly, reading from selections in her father's well-stocked and widely admired book collection. The budding author penned her first full-length poem at the age of sixteen. With enlightened parents who afforded her both the opportunity and the encouragement to broaden herself intellectually, Morton received an education that was exceptional for any person at the time, male or female, but all the more unusual because she was an eighteenth-century girl.

By the time she reached adolescence, the motivated Miss Apthorp had already learned several languages—French and German, probably Latin, and perhaps even Greek. Additionally, her early verse reveals a familiarity with the classics from a young age. James Apthorp's extensive library at Braintree, which was known throughout the region, gave her access, right at her fingertips, to volumes for her entertainment and edification. For the young poet, such unrestricted entrée to the printed word, and to the universe of ideas it provided, was an enormous resource. An 1800 inventory of her father's estate counted more than 1100 volumes on a panoply of subjects ranging from world history and philosophy to physiognomy and antiquities. The book-filled environment, which would have been fertile ground for any intellectual, served as the foundation for Morton to become much more than merely a cultivated young "woman of accomplishment" who placidly plucked her harp for the amusement of dinner guests. Her talents and intellect far exceeded any "transcendent charms" granted to the female ancestors whom Morton versified in her

poetry.

The early writings of Morton, many published for the first time in *My Mind and Its Thoughts*, frequently cited the many distinguished guests who came calling at her family's Braintree estate. Her elaborate notes to these selections mentioned British nobility and American patriots as well as international intellectuals. And if the Apthorps at times felt estranged from their neighbors, they always remained friendly with the Bowdoin and Adamses. Among the visiting illuminati was the respected history painter of the Revolutionary War, John Trumbull (1756-1843). Morton's father (or perhaps one of her elder brothers) and painter-patriot Trumbull were acquainted.

One of her better poetic efforts, "To Pollio," from 1793, suggests that the painter was an old family friend. Allying Trumbull with Raphael, the poem declared him "young Columbia's boast" and credited the painter, though he was but three years older than she, with her early tutelage. She referred to him as "the artist on whose voice instruction grew" and by whom "many a lesson [was] taught," which seems to indicate that he somehow directed the course of her reading. Unusually for a painter, Trumbull had been educated at Harvard and only afterward took up art in earnest. Morton's lines imply that, by 1793, the painter and the poet had known each other for some time, as Morton alluded to their early encounters when her "morn of life was new," calling their "friendship holy," and recalled her relief upon seeing her "early friend restored,/With every worth her youth adored." How "early" their connection was, however, is difficult to determine. When the poem was

first published, Morton was thirty-four years old, and though she certainly could have written it before that time, she also refers to the Morton-Apthorp affair, which had taken place only four years before. Perhaps she took poetic license in this instance; her “morn of life” can also be interpreted as the poet’s innocence before the dark cloud of the scandal consumed her. And on the whole, Morton’s post-exposé writings are marked by a disillusioned and at times even macabre tenor.

Morton later included the verse inspired by Trumbull in *My Mind and Its Thoughts* after she had reworked it a bit and given it a new name, “Lines inscribed to a celebrated painter, upon his return to America.” The original published version expressed gratitude to Trumbull for his kindness to her during a time when she had “felt that prying stare/the mean neglect, th’ insulting air.” And in what was clearly a literary nod to her domestic scandal, Morton wrote how she “felt those by ties of blood allied/stab the already wounded side.” Aside from the paranoid tone which became a regrettable hallmark of her style, this poem is curious for the manner in which she chose to inject her private pain into the public sphere. In effect, Morton circumvented the intentions of the *Massachusetts Magazine* publishers. By using the platform offered by the journal to print what was ostensibly a tribute to Trumbull, Morton manipulated the opportunity for exposure in the service of her own ends.

Throughout the Trumbull tribute as well as in later verse, Morton voiced a sophisticated familiarity with the language of both the visual and literary arts—an interest

traceable to these early years. First at Apthorp Mansion in Boston and later at her family's Braintree estate, the die was cast for her life of the mind. Morton's youthful encounters with the visual arts as well as with painters and poets provided an ideal education for the curious and clever young woman who grew into "New England's greatest salonniere" and whom Gilbert Stuart would depict as the first American woman of ideas.

### **Return to Apthorp Mansion: Pomp, Circumstance, and the Man with "Soul-illuminated Eyes"**

At the beginning of the Revolution, the Apthorp mansion in Boston was still occupied by Sarah's grandmother, along with her uncle Thomas Apthorp and various other family members. It is probable, given its proximity to Braintree and Morton's reverence for her forebears, that she visited them frequently. And on one such excursion, she chanced upon a promising young Harvard graduate named Perez Morton. His father, Joseph Morton, was proprietor of the celebrated White Horse Tavern, where as a boy Perez would have overheard and was known to participate in the often-volatile debates about the pros and cons of provincial and royal policy. From this experience, Morton likely acquired the zeal for fiery political discussions for which he eventually became known. Once in Boston, Morton soon made a name for himself as a talented lawyer, revolutionary politician, and dazzling orator. His reputation, to which he was unusually attentive, would have preceded him.

In prerevolutionary Boston, lawyers had widely been viewed with some cynicism, a

“necessary evil rather than a positive good.” The suspicion was confirmed only when a large proportion among that profession remained loyal to the British Crown. During the years approaching independence, however, the public image of attorneys began to show signs of improvement. Richard H. Brown explains their newfound prestige as an outgrowth of the “increasing Anglicization of the upper reaches of Massachusetts society” rather than any “noticeable shift in the Yankee Puritan outlook.” Whatever the case, the adamantly prorevolutionary Perez Morton arrived on the legal and political scene with perfect timing.

Morton first attracted public notice for his 1776 funeral address for Bunker Hill hero General Joseph Warren, who was among the last of the patriot soldiers to abandon the hill. Morton was chosen to deliver the chief address by a committee of local officials, an honor for the young man. The charismatic Perez, never one to pass up an opportunity to perform, took full advantage of his time in the limelight. He was said to have had a rapt audience. Abigail Adams, who attended the funeral, held in King’s Chapel on April 8, 1776, recounted the ceremony in a letter to her husband, John Adams, who was unable to be present. In the correspondence, dated April 10, 1776, Mrs. Adams commended the “oration by Mr. Morton,” which she hoped would be printed, writing, “I think the subject must have inspired him. A young fellow could not have wished a finer opportunity to display his talents.”

The “young fellow’s” talent did not go unnoticed. By the time he was in his early

twenties, Morton had graduated from law school at Harvard, set up his own practice, and initiated a career in public service. When he delivered the oratory that launched his political future, Morton was already serving as a member of the Committee of Correspondence. Ambitious and charming, with polished manners and refined sensibilities, he seemed perfectly suited for the genteel and learned Sarah Apthorp. As for Mr. Morton, his eyes were on the future—his own.

The soon-to-be-wed poet was certainly enamored of her betrothed. Sarah Morton wrote of the effect that her future husband's elegant figure had on other women and commemorated his "soul-illuminated eyes" in verse. The pairing seemed destined to be a union of distinction. Morton imagined their life together as one "triumphant passion," assured that her husband's affection "reigned for [her] alone." While not ideal, their match was nevertheless fruitful. They had six children, all of whom Sarah Morton outlived. Their marriage was marked by passion, if not of the type that she had envisioned. All of the eyes of Boston were soon turned upon them both; however, the attention that the Mortons eventually garnered was far from triumphant.

Throughout her writings, and characteristic of the era, Morton returned to the concept of the eyes as "windows to the soul." The notion resonated with readers during the "Age of Sensibility" and remained an important issue in the early nineteenth century, when concerns about mass immigration and burgeoning urban centers made it increasingly difficult for people to be confident that the many new faces with which they came in contact



were to be trusted. On a personal level, the early Romantic obsession with knowing the “True Self” enthralled Sarah Morton, particularly because she felt she had so misjudged the eyes of her philandering husband.

Perez and Sarah Morton were wed at Trinity Church, Boston, in 1781. After their vows had been pronounced, Morton’s name underwent another permutation. She left Trinity Church as Mrs. Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton. And by 1784, Mrs. Perez Morton had become mistress of Apthorp Mansion, the ancestral home to which she ascribed such significance and from which she derived so much satisfaction. Mr. Morton purchased the rights to the property from his new brother-in-law, Charles Ward Apthorp, and the couple set up housekeeping in grand style. The building, which had previously been confiscated as the property of a loyalist expatriate, would soon become an enclave for Federalists and anti-Federalists alike. From the outside looking in—and probably from the perspective of the average Bostonian—the Mortons in their mansion must have seemed an enviable pair. Their reputation as a couple as well as individually was beyond reproach.

At first, the two gracefully combined a spirited social life with the demands of a growing family while tending to their individual vocations. In keeping with Apthorp family tradition, Morton entertained lavishly. Soon the home of her ancestors was again the scene of many fashionable and extravagant *fêtes*, the “feast, the dance, the song of glee” convened anew. However, it was now Sarah Morton who played hostess to a continuous stream of noteworthy visitors. Under her deft guidance, the King Street home became a

gathering place for Boston literati—who encouraged Morton’s literary efforts—as well as for party leaders hailing from across the political spectrum. “Parlor politics” was Morton’s specialty, and it was in this company that the foundation was laid for New England’s most influential and distinctively American salon.

### **The Quarrel over “Constantia”: Pseudonyms and Identity in American Manuscript Culture**

The stage was now set for Morton to make her grand entrance to Boston’s republic of letters. Though she had been writing since her girlhood days in Braintree, Morton had customarily circulated her writings, or *belles lettres*, only in manuscript form among her friends and contacts, who then might pass her work—perhaps adding their personal reviews or annotations—to their own literary or social circles. According to this eighteenth-century practice, belletristic productions were meant to be read aloud, usually to a group; implicit in manuscript culture, then, was a performative component. Many histories of female authorship contend that women who did not publish their work “publicly” were forced to resort to ostensibly private, less literary forms such as letter-writing and diary-keeping. In Morton’s case, however, the paradigm does not stand when compared with her actual practice.

Writers male and female, intellectual or aesthetic, were avid practitioners of the manuscript form as well as integral personalities in the nascent salon society of republican America. Salon participation was of course limited to those with considerable leisure time

to spare, but letter-writing and diary-keeping were common practices among almost all segments of society during the early years of the republic. Additionally, authors of both sexes regularly employed pseudonyms by which they were immediately recognizable to their intimates. Many writers of letters imaginatively assumed cognomens when corresponding with family and friends. Pen names were oftentimes designed to reveal rather than conceal authors' identities or, at times, their *sex* when they published, but also when they did not. Further, according to the ideology of republican print culture, as David Waldstreicher has pointed out, "anonymity in print" was a "key tenet of the republican sphere." Contributions to the public debate were to be judged by their merit, not by their authors.

Prior to 1788, Morton had written under and was well known in her literary circle by the *nom de plume* Constantia. When Constantia's verse began appearing in local journals and newspapers, a public dispute ensued after the appearance of a second "Constantia," a rival woman writer from Boston, Judith Sargent Murray, who was not of a mind to compromise. Murray was probably best known for her 1798 manifesto, *The Gleaner*, which for its time was a rather startling collection of essays and "miscellany" in which she self-consciously wrote from a masculine point of view. Both Murray and Morton were regular contributors to the *Massachusetts Magazine*, among the most successful magazines published in eighteenth-century New England, and each claimed to be the first to embrace the pseudonym, so their quarrel over the cognomen presented

difficulties for the journal's editors.

With the hope of avoiding confusion, a letter, "To the Favourites of the Muses," was published in the January 1790 issue. The passage roundly applauded Morton's "elegant effusions," affirming that her "truly [p]oetical lines merit every attention" while merely noting Murray's contributions. The editors then gently suggested that perhaps "one or other of the fair competitors in poetical fame, should be pleased to alter her signature." It soon became clear that Mrs. Murray had no inclination to abandon her pen name, so, in a concession made only reluctantly, Morton changed her preferred *nom de plume* rather than share it with another. Forced to relinquish her signature, she found herself once again in pursuit of a name.

Morton, in still another gesture of self-naming, and this time in a highly publicized forum, adopted the designation "Philenia, a Lady of Boston." She would publish under this name for much of her career. However, the Constantia matter was by no means over for Philenia. Morton—who never forgot a slight—addressed an epistle to the rogue Constantia in a May 1790 issue of *Massachusetts Magazine*. In this open letter, she commented on the cognomen conflict, defending her choice of the appellation and then politely insisting that she was "unconscious of theft." This seemingly civil resolution, however, masked what became a longtime, though never publicly, declared rivalry between the two. Still miffed by the matter a full seven years later, Morton revealed her animosity in a personal letter to Joseph Dennie dated March, 27, 1797. In this missive, Morton

gleefully announced to Dennie that he must not “presume to flatter” himself with being “distinguished as the only [A]uthor; for Mrs. Murray has given out proposals for printing by [S]ubscription 600 [P]ages of “The Gleaner”!!!.” On no other occasion did Morton employ such emphatic usage of the exclamation point.

### **Strains of Discord at Home—“Luxury, Vanity, Foppery” at Large**

From all appearances, the Mortons had “arrived” upon the establishment of their Boston household. Perez certainly thought as much. His political career was off to a brilliant start, and he had secured a beautiful and talented wife—from a prominent family—who was even beginning to acquire a national reputation as a writer of verse. Their well-heeled social set comprised Boston’s most forward-thinking and pleasure-seeking crowd, and thus also the most controversial. Among their intimates were the energetic and cosmopolitan James Swan and his flamboyant wife, Hepzibah Clarke Swan. Like the glamorous Swans, the Mortons were in the planning phases of their own move to Dorchester, where they would live in “Morton Pavilion” just across Dudley Street from the proprietors of the celebrated “Swan House.” Once there, Morton presided over her salon from her perch atop the “Pavilion” at Dorchester in what she referred to as the “sky parlor.”

Writer and publishing pioneer Isaiah Thomas, who had achieved notoriety when he took the extreme measure of divorcing his wife for infidelity, was one of Morton’s regular guests. Wealthy lawyer Harrison Gray Otis and Boston printer and infamous duel participant Samuel Jarvis were also known to travel in the poet’s orbit. The intermittent

presence of the boisterous and often drunk Robert Treat Paine, Jr., always added flair to their evening's amusements. Paine was eventually installed by his cohorts as the "master of ceremonies" at the Federal Theater, whereupon he promptly scandalized his conservative family by marrying an actress. At the time, actresses were considered the worst sort of public women—they were roundly associated with promiscuity, occupying a social position just a shade above that of prostitutes.

If the Mortons had aligned themselves with a fast crowd known for a freedom of manners and European excesses, it was only a sign of the times—they were young, they were enlightened, so why conduct themselves otherwise? The Mortons, along with many of their glamorous and slightly scandalous friends, would be parodied in one of America's earliest satirical plays, *Sans Souci, alias Free and Easy; or an Evening's Peep in a Polite Circle* (1785); the popular play went through two editions in its day. Unfazed, a self-satisfied Perez Morton was elated to be, at last, on the verge of both personal satisfaction and local political fame. However, his wife may not have shared this sentiment.

Beneath the couple's unified front, hints of discord could be heard. The various attributes and differences not readily apparent when gazed upon through the forgiving eyes of courtship began to come into full view. Perez Morton was an outspoken vestry at King's Chapel, where the family owned a pew, and he became one of the principal advocates for the church's conversion from a stalwart Anglican preserve to Unitarianism. Sarah Morton, by contrast, remained dedicated not only to the memory but also the faith of

her ancestors: she was an Episcopalian through and through. Although she appears to have tolerated her husband's more liberal leanings, Mrs. Morton was less progressive on this issue; for her, King's Chapel was always Episcopalian.

Politically, too, the couple espoused disparate views. Mr. Morton was a highly visible Democratic-Republican or, as the group was derisively referred to, a "Jacobin," as its members had French-leaning sympathies during a time when the more Anglophilic Federalists were by far the dominant party in Boston. The emergence of the Democratic-Republicans in the late 1780s through the early 1790s made Federalists a little nervous. As one of the leaders of the minority party, Perez, who always had a flair for the dramatic and enjoyed nothing so much as the public eye, was quickly solidifying a reputation for fiery revolutionary outbursts. By contrast, Sarah Morton was an outspoken Federalist. The Mortons each had their own vision of what constituted an ideal republic and, while equally nationalistic, Sarah Morton was vociferously independent and not in the least bit reluctant to publicly announce her political perspectives. In public opposition to her husband's well-known Francophilism, Morton published "Elegy to the Memory of Marie Antoinette, the unfortunate Queen of Louis the 16<sup>th</sup> of France—written immediately upon hearing of the event of her death." In stark contrast to Perez, Sarah Morton vocally opposed the French Revolution. Her verse focused primarily on the execution of Marie Antoinette, "on whom the cruel strokes of fate descend," in a graphic and rather gory poem that describes how the "fiends of murder quit [her] bloodless form." Mordant in tone, the poem scorns the

“selfish-mourner” who dared grieve over the event that she viewed as “sweet solace for a world of pain.” This posture also paralleled her own misery upon her sister’s death, symbolically casting her husband as the “selfish mourner” who cared only for his own neck, or reputation.

For Mrs. Morton, who would never have an official venue through which to make her opinions known, the writings of Philenia served as her public voice. Her husband, by comparison, held a series of political appointments and was repeatedly elected to the Committee of Correspondence from Boston and later to the Massachusetts House of Representatives. From 1794 to 1796, Perez served as a representative from Boston to the Massachusetts General Court. In 1803, he returned to the House as a representative from Dorchester, where he served until 1811 after being elected speaker in 1806. Eventually appointed Massachusetts attorney general in 1811, Morton held the post for the next twenty years. Paradoxically, it was in her capacity as politician’s wife—characterized as it was by both travel and extended periods away from her husband as well as liberal interaction with diverse public figures from across the globe—that Sarah Morton began to carve out a space and ultimately a name of her own.

Political differences aside, both Mortons were deeply involved in Boston’s civic affairs. Sarah Morton was among the prominent writers who helped to found the Boston Library Society along with her first cousin, Charles Bulfinch. Ledgers from the State Street library show that she “charged prodigious numbers of books” even after the Mortons’



move to the upscale suburb of Dorchester in 1784. Sarah and Perez shared a deep enthusiasm for the arts, even working as a team to help repeal the sumptuary laws, dating back to 1750, that prohibited theatrical performances in Boston. Their controversial combined efforts were instrumental in the eventual establishment of the Federal Street Theater, where Mr. Morton became one of the shareholders and a trustee of the elegant new theater house.

Many among Boston's older generation had long considered the theater an idle amusement that had no place in a democratic republic. And the sort of woman who attended the theater, it was assumed, went not for the entertainment but instead to "enjoy the decadent pleasures of self-display"—a public accusation to which Sarah Morton eventually became accustomed. The Mortons' high-profile role in the city's theatrical revival was met with disapproval in some more conservative circles, leaving the couple vulnerable to those critics who preferred the status quo. In keeping with the prevailing construction, many felt that the only female characters worse than the women in the audience were the actresses who performed on the stage.

Republican stalwarts such as Samuel Adams and writer Mercy Otis Warren, who was dubbed the "conscience of the revolution," routinely railed against the theater as representative of all things European—the very excesses from which the founders were trying to distance themselves: luxury, vanity, foppery, and frivolities of the most depraved sort. In their collective imagination, national virtue had become precarious at best. By

contrast, many members of the town's faster and younger set, like Perez and Sarah Morton, craved both the society and the entertainment provided by such lively diversions. Sarah Morton, for one, had begun to search in earnest for any escape from looming suspicion at home as well as public speculation surrounding the fidelity of her handsome husband.

**The Fatal Consequences of Seduction: "Guilty Innocence," "Black Ingratitude,"  
and Blemished Virtue**

On August 28, 1788, the *Massachusetts Gazette* printed this succinct notice in the column of deaths: "On Thursday the 28<sup>th</sup> ult. Miss Frances Theodora Apthorp." The simple statement belied the complexity of the events that culminated in the suicide of Sarah Morton's younger sister—"Fanny," as her intimates knew her. The unfortunate episode was reported in the pages of the *Massachusetts Centinel*, written into America's first novel, and routinely bandied about in the town square. What for Sarah Morton was a devastating (and private) family matter became public fodder for moralists, gossips, and opportunists alike. Verbatim portions of a rambling suicide letter—written over the course of several days spanning the period from Wednesday, August 20, until Wednesday, August 27, 1788—were published at length in the local newspapers. Fanny's parting words initially took the form of a journal entry, then gradually degenerated into meditations on the nature of love and death, justice and sin.

Before swallowing the poison that would end her life on that fateful August morning in 1788, the twenty-year-old Apthorp confided the following lines to her journal:

I mean to prove my Guilty Innocence for I can give it no other title, it will be called

by some a rash step yet a thing that has never been out of my mind for a fortnight cannot be called sudden. It may be for the interest of some to call it lunacy. . . . I have felt from the first that this matter would go against me, but I have resolved never to live after it has, I feel like one who has been on a long visit yet a most uncomfortable one, I feel like a poor wanderer. . . .

On the eve of her suicide, Miss Apthorp, though clearly distraught, sounded eerily in command of her faculties.

However by the close of Fanny's diary/suicide letter, she seemed distracted and to have lost her grip on reality. Medical research has shown that certain poisons will disintegrate the mind as they slowly begin to kill the victim. By the time she died, possibly from ingesting mercury, she was probably in the throes of mental disintegration. Her doleful lines, addressed "To Mr. Morton," explained exactly why she committed "self-murder." Fanny, the author of her own death, believed she had no other choice. Writing with lucidity and firm hand until the poison had begun to take effect, Sarah Morton's younger sister made plain her dark intentions, which belied the findings of the coroner's inquest.

The "matter" that Fanny feared would "go against her" was the revelation of an affair with her brother-in-law, Perez Morton, and the resultant clandestine pregnancy. A year or two earlier, Fanny had come to visit her sister and husband in Boston. From all accounts, Perez was enchanted by his beautiful sister-in-law and induced her to stay with them in town. Soon after her arrival, she and Perez commenced a secret affair, resulting in the unplanned pregnancy. And, as Fanny's parting words portended, the matter did indeed

go against them both.

Fanny Apthorp enacted the grim reality of the trope common in cautionary tales of the eighteenth century, whereby an innocent woman surrenders to the advances of a fast-talking seducer. And like the archetypal sentimental heroine who, once fallen, is betrayed by her lover, then ostracized both by her family and by society, Fanny faced a woeful fate. With few favorable alternatives, the imperiled damsels of fiction generally resorted to a life of prostitution, destitution, and solitude. The melodramatic literary device mirrored reality for Fanny, who, initially at least, adamantly refused to reveal the name of her seducer. As a result, her parents, true to both the sentimental formula and to Fanny's self-professed fears, did indeed vow to cast their wayward daughter out into the world like a "poor wanderer." Fanny's somber final words spoke to the limited options available to a woman in her unenviable position in the nation's early years.

This parental threat to the fallen Fanny ignited a passionate response from Morton, who came to the unwavering defense of her favorite sister, even submitting a poem to the *Centinel* written under the pointed pseudonym "The Goddess of Revenge." In this instance, Morton's employment of the cognomen was unnecessary, for all of Boston knew its author. However, by fashioning herself as a sort of classical overlord—objectively watching from the heavens—Morton, much like the goddesses of antiquity, manipulated her authorial position to serve her own ends. The maneuver allowed the poet to identify herself with a divine, or moral, authority, thereby casting the reaction of her parents in

dramatic relief.

Morton addressed the verse not to her husband or to Fanny, but to her mother and father, whom she felt had abandoned their daughter in her darkest hour. Its first lines admonished the Apthorps for renouncing their child: “Where is the father fled, with raptur’d breast!/Where the fond mother, in her offspring blest! Ah wretched child! No friends thy grief control/No melting parent sooths [sic] thy anguish’d soul.” However, evidence suggests that both mother and father, though appalled by Fanny’s conduct with her sister’s husband, nonetheless initially attempted to lend support. An anonymous reply to “The Goddess of Revenge” appeared in the *Centinel* the following week; the passage pronounced her “pompous verses” outright fabrications, asking the readers, “How can parents soothe or console when one is forbidden the house with execration, and the other drove from it with opprobrious language, when maternal affection was the sole cause of the visit?” Unmoved, the “Goddess” declined to answer.

Instead, Morton styled herself as a heroic martyred figure who rose to the occasion in steadfast devotion to her two betrayers: her suicidal sister and philandering husband. Fanny’s suicide letter begged her sister’s absolution for what she called her “Black Ingratitude.” Morton granted that forgiveness, though her public image was forever tainted by the younger woman’s duplicity—her own virtue blemished by association. Morton’s disposition in the aftermath of calamity’s revelation literally embodied the sentimental ethos, the *coeur sensible*, of the times. Cruelly, and again in accordance with the sentimental

formula, fate would deal the wronged and world-weary Morton yet another crushing blow.

Only four months after Fanny's body was laid to rest, she was forced to bury a second loved one—her own newborn son, Charles, who lived only eighteen hours. A still-grieving Morton lamented his short life in verse, "Memento, for my infant who lived only eighteen hours." The timing of the infant's arrival is significant, indicating that the two sisters were likely pregnant at the same time, in the same home, by the same man. The narrative of the Morton-Apthorp scandal seemed then ripped from the pages of an eighteenth-century sentimental novel. For Morton, however, the love triangle, illicit pregnancy, and Fanny's suicide were all too real. That the real-life Morton scandal was as salacious as any fiction reveals much about the nature of virtue and vice in the republic as well as among its citizenry.

Hardly alone in their private vice, the Mortons, along with many "virtuous" American citizens, saw their personal tragedies publicly exposed at the courthouse and in the press—painful and private family business a currency to be traded in the town square. By the end of the eighteenth century, the exploitation and tabloidization of personal tragedies were commonplace. The avid coverage of domestic scandal by the press served as communal cautionary tales, propping up pre-existing social hierarchies and reminding American readers of the natural order. The message to women was explicit: feminine virtue (chastity) was like a "tropical bird in a silver cage." Exotic and precious, feminine virtue had to be protected at all costs.

## ***Finis* for Fanny: “Self-Murder” and an “Insane State of Mind” in Republican Boston**

In the days following Fanny’s “self-murder,” as it was known in the eighteenth century, city officials in Braintree, Massachusetts, conducted the obligatory investigation into her sudden death, as required by law. The verdict of the local coroner’s jury determined that Fanny had perished by deliberate suicide, and Perez was implicated in her death. Her suicide letter contained evidence suggesting his complicity; the missive itself, which was addressed “To Mr. Morton,” called him the “first and last man I ever knew,” indicating that he was, at the very least, guilty of her seduction and moral corruption. During the eighteenth century, in the eyes of the law and in popular sentiment, in-laws were considered to have the same status as siblings. Thus the too-familiar relations engaged in by Perez and Fanny were considered taboo and incestuous—just as if they were brother and sister.

James Apthorp was horrified by the verdict. As patriarch of the family and guardian of its name and honor, the elder Apthorp and longtime Braintree resident used his influence to arrange a review of the coroner’s findings. In this case, no bumbling constables were charged with the task. None other than Braintree mainstays John Adams and James Bowdoin—the same neighbors who had glanced the other way regarding Apthorp’s perceived loyalism in the immediate post-revolutionary years—acted as mediators in a review of the coroner’s decision and appeared at his side to assist in crisis management. The deliberations of Adams and Bowdoin as well as the outcome of the

unprecedented investigation were published in the *Massachusetts Centinel* on October 8,

1788, and are of sufficient interest to quote at length:

We are happy in being able to announce to the publick, that the accusations brought against a fellow citizen, in consequence of a late unhappy event, and which has been the cause of so much domestick calamity, and publick speculation, have, at the mutual desire of the parties, been submitted to, and fully inquired into by their Excellencies James Bowdoin and John Adams, Esq's, and that the results of their inquiry is, that the said accusations are not, *in any degree*, supported, and that therefore there is just ground for the restoration of peace and harmony between them; and in consequence thereof, they have recommended to them with the spirit of candour and mutual condescension, again to embrace in friendship and affection. We would add, that were it not for the verdict of the jury of inquest to the contrary (for verdicts must always be respected) it would have been the wish of many, that the extraordinary conduct of the deceased, had been early attributed to the only accountable cause, an insane state of mind.

Just like that, harmony was officially restored, and domestic calamity as well as Fanny's eternal damnation was averted. Proclaiming that verdicts "must always be respected," the two venerables nevertheless ignored entirely the original jury's findings. The contrary assertion by Adams and Bowdoin, that Fanny's mental frailties—as opposed to Perez, or her dire circumstances—were to blame for her death, resulted in the public perception of impropriety. Their decision was soon subjected to various rumors and much public speculation. Boston's republic of readers regarded the involvement of the two respected men as an attempt to preserve the honor of longtime friend and neighbor Apthorp, an attempt to salvage what was left of Perez Morton's reputation, or both.

Presumably, having a daughter who had gone mad was easier to recover from socially, and potentially spiritually, than having a "suicide" in the family. The two circumstances were mutually exclusive in the eighteenth-century imagination. Once Adams



and Bowdoin officially found the distressed Fanny of an “insane state of mind,” then her death could be ruled accidental. This ruling ensured that the Apthorp name would not be tainted by the scandal of suicide, as the designation also left open the possibility that Fanny would be reunited with her loved ones in the afterlife. In his enlightening study, *American Suicide*, historian Kushner explains that under contemporary Massachusetts law, suicide was a felony, and, as a *felo de se*—a crime against oneself—self-murder was punishable by law. Additionally, as in murder, both “intention and motive had to be demonstrated.” No intention, no felony; no felony, no suicide.

What for Fanny can be read as an independent assertion of free will, even a liberating gesture was, for her contemporaries, tantamount to voluntarily choosing eternal damnation. If determined to be of sound mind at the time of her death, Fanny would have been denied a Christian burial, and her *felo* would have brought infamy upon her entire family. Her lengthy suicide manifesto spelled out Fanny’s motivation and made clear her intention. When writing her rather solipsistic suicide letter, Fanny assumed an authorial posture of a fully conscious narrator who, though not unconcerned about her fate in the afterlife, chose death as the most acceptable, to her, among the limited options available.

Rather than endure life as a familial and social pariah, “a poor wanderer,” Fanny chose an unorthodox exit. In her essay “Speaking Silences: Women’s Suicide,” Margaret Higonnet suggests that, among women, suicides have historically often been dedicated, like a poem, to someone in particular. In Fanny’s case, her last letter was penned to Perez. As

if proclaiming both her authorial and inalienable rights, Fanny signed the document using her full Christian name, Francis Theodora Apthorp, and—with a dramatic flourish—she penned the word *Finis* in large, scrolling, yet firm handwriting. Like the last page of a sentimental novel, this was, for Fanny at least, “The End.” Rumor and innuendo persisted well after she took her own life, and, for Morton, the specter of her sister’s suicide loomed long after Fanny’s final act.

**The Dubious Legacy of *The Power of Sympathy*: Mistaken Identity and Morton’s  
“Solitary Self,” Founded in Truth**

The ignominy that marked the end for Fanny Apthorp initiated the first installment of a drawn-out denouement for her older sister, who characterized her life as dramatized by a “series of disappointments” that were “cruelly aggravated by death.” The long-suffering Morton, who, though she “passed the smiles of some,” also “met the frowns of many,” felt forever betrayed by her family and scrutinized her community. Romantic abstractions aside, Morton still had to face the public. Everywhere she went, it seemed, her virtue—private and public—was a topic of conversation. The reversal by Adams and Bowdoin of the verdict by the coroner’s jury sparked a flurry of heated commentary in the local press. To the citizenry of Boston, particularly Mr. Morton’s many political opponents, the findings of the two legendary republicans appeared obviously contrived in order to exculpate the prominent lawyer Perez. The very idea that Adams and Bowdoin could simply wave their wands of influence and blithely set aside the findings of the coroner’s

jury did not sit well with most Bostonians.

Newspapers of the time were rife with submissions by writers eager to pronounce verdicts of their own. Illustrative of the public acrimony, these couplets appeared in *The Herald of Freedom*: “But blast the villain, though to altars fled/who robs the living and insults the dead.” Typical of the reaction to the perceived preferential treatment afforded the perfidious Perez, these verses refer to the “altars” to which he fled, presumably the security proffered by Adams and Bowdoin at the behest of James Apthorp. Much to the chagrin of the families involved, just about the time that the media attention surrounding Fanny’s suicide at last began to subside, a piece of fiction emerged that would stoke the flames of scandal anew. In January of the following year, *The Power of Sympathy: or, the Triumph of Nature: Founded in Truth* was released. One of the novel’s numerous subplots (Letters XXI-XXIII) contained a seduction story that almost literally paralleled the Morton-Apthorp scandal. For many years, until around 1894, the epistolary tale was mistakenly attributed to the pen of Morton herself; the “truth” upon which a portion of the convoluted story was founded was, of course, the Morton-Apthorp affair. Boston’s reading public could not get enough of this story, and local publishers leveraged the affair as well as the notoriety of the Mortons for all they were worth. Over the course of the next several years, the Mortons made a series of unsolicited cameos in the contemporary press. Clearly, their story sold.

The true author of the *Power of Sympathy* was William Hill Brown (1756-1793), who dedicated the sentimental drama to the “young ladies of United Columbia” and

“intended to represent the specious Causes and to expose the fatal Consequences of Seduction.” But that is not all. The author ostensibly had loftier motivations than simply to caution young women to resist the lure of seduction, claiming that he endeavored to “inspire the Female Mind with a Principle of Self Complacency and to Promote the Economy of Human Life.” Brown’s ambitious goals are featured on the title page of the printed version of the novel and “inscribed, with esteem and sincerity, by their Friend and Humble Servant.” Whether the author is a friend to womankind is debatable; he was certainly no friend to Sarah Morton or her family.

Morton and Brown had been acquainted for many years. They were only three years apart in age and had been childhood playmates. William, the son of a dignified and prosperous watchmaker, Gawen Brown, grew up on State Street in the shadow of Apthorp Mansion. Brown and Morton launched their writing careers at about the same time, though their prior relationship did little to inspire loyalty on the part of Brown. The opposite may actually have been the case; some of Brown’s other writings from the period suggest that he may have harbored real animosity toward either the Apthorps or, later, the Mortons. He once quipped in an essay that “nothing more effectively destroys the blessings of a good neighbourhood [sic], than Scandal” and that “weak minds are generally most given to defamation.” Brown’s professed aversion to scandal, however, did not prevent him from including a barely fictionalized account of the Morton-Apthorp affair in his *Power of Sympathy*. Presumably, Brown pardoned his own mind from such feebleness—he had no

trouble whatever contributing to the defamation of longtime family friends.

The novel's circuitous plot line contained a series of loosely related vignettes bound together by the ubiquitous eighteenth-century theme, the perils of seduction. Capitalizing on the recent peccadilloes that had taken place in the Morton household, Brown thinly disguised Fanny as his "Ophelia" character. Throughout the tale, he most aggressively targeted Mr. Morton. Leaving no question as to his fictionalized double, Brown named the deceiver "Martin" and cast him as a lascivious villain. The novel was printed by Isaiah Thomas, perhaps Boston's most successful publisher and a close associate of Sarah Morton, who nonetheless was quick to cash in on her misfortunes. Adding to its allure, Thomas printed the novel in two attractive calf-bound volumes and promoted *The Power of Sympathy* as the "Story of Ophelia," although the affair was in actuality a minor subplot. The unwarranted spotlight on the scandal was further enhanced by visual aids; a rather gruesome woodcut on its cover page depicted a listless woman in the throes of death, with the caption "O Fatal! Fatal Poison!"; its bold heading read, "The Story of Ophelia."

Through a sensational story line of seduction and sibling incest, Brown's poorly written novel demonstrated the preoccupation among republican readers with notions of virtue and vice in both the public and private spheres, especially as the values were debated and commented upon in the dynamic new forum of print. The Morton-Apthorp affair embodied—in the extreme—many of the communal anxieties of life in years between the Revolution and before nationhood. Gossip, sexual deviance, suicide, betrayal and

seduction were experiences to which most members of the population could relate on some level.

One slightly later treatment of the historical constructions of scandal suggests that as long as aberrant behavior remained “private and a superficial and moral and social order is preserved, scandal does not exist. Such conduct must be made public before it can shock.” During the early years of the American republic, “keeping a secret” was becoming a near impossible proposition, as the compulsion to broadcast salacious revelations oftentimes trumped the professed desire for the preservation of order. The Morton-Apthorp affair was made public time and again through *The Power of Sympathy* (and its countless reprints) as well as through the event’s perpetual rehashing in the local press. However, the shock generated by the episode was only one component of its longevity.

### **Philenia Strikes Back: *Ouâbi*, A Literary Riposte to *The Power of Sympathy***

In the wake of the Morton-Apthorp affair, Morton threw herself into her writing. Under the name “Philenia, A Lady of Boston,” she began publishing zealously as well as circulating her work among her literary circle as a regular participant in republican manuscript culture. During this intellectually fertile period, Morton brought out her first work in book form—*Ouâbi: or the Virtues of Nature. An Indian Tale in Four Cantos* (1790)—just one year after the Morton-Apthorp scandal broke. She strategically dedicated the work to the “Honourable James Bowdoin, Esq.,” knowing full well the popular opinion of his official involvement in her own triangular affair. Snubbing her nose at town gossips,

Morton flaunted her proximity to the revered former governor, whom she recognized as one of her most valuable allies. As supporting documentation, the publishers attached a letter from the recently deceased Bowdoin, from October 16, 1790, acknowledging that he had accepted the inscription and even encouraged Morton to abandon her pen name, suggesting that “it would be best [that] the real name of the fair author be substituted.” Morton swiftly grasped the personal but also the commercial traction that came along with powerful affiliations.

Though she did not follow his advice—perhaps feeling protected or emboldened under the guise of Philenia—Bowdoin’s endorsement had the effect of discomfiting her critics, whom Morton felt had delighted too much in her misfortunes, as it propped up her public image. The thin volume, only fifty-seven pages, contained what Morton described as a “wholly American” tale of interracial romance on the Illinois frontier, written in epic form. Having extensively studied the community structures of North American Indians, Morton utilized this venue to self-consciously display her knowledge, enhancing her status as a woman of the mind. The principal characters of the taut narrative were two Indian brothers, “Celario” and “Ouâbi,” who were in love with the same woman, “Azakia”—Ouâbi’s wife. The similarities between Morton’s literary love triangle and the events in her life would not have been lost on Boston readers—and that was the point.

The subtext of Morton’s romantic tale was a subtle and prolonged retort to the transparent literary stylings of Brown in the *Power of Sympathy*. With her selection of

subject matter, Morton placed herself squarely in line with the intellectuals of the British Romantic movement, though hers was a “wholly American” tale. In a style reminiscent of British writer Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, Morton mythologized America’s noble savage as she built up her own identity and authority as both an intellectual and as a contributor to the American discourse. The introduction declared her wish that she “not be considered [merely] an enthusiast,” for she was no amateur, but rather she had been afforded the “partial eye of the patriot.”

The fictionalized love triangle was Morton’s platform for addressing Boston’s reading public regarding the matter of her own personal saga. Further, as a literary device, Morton employed the *ménage-a-trois* to speak to a national audience in advocacy of Native American rights. However, *Ouâbi* contained another unconventional message regarding the institution of marriage. More radical than Morton’s anti-slavery position was her proposal of divorce as a practical solution to an unhappy union—for Indians, that is. In the tale, Morton described in great detail both a marriage and a “divorce ceremony,” explaining that unmarried women wear a “maiden veil,” a “kind of cap, or veil, on their heads, which is taken off at the marriage ceremony.” She continued in a lengthy footnote that the “marriage contract of North American Indians is not necessarily [during life something missing?], but while the parties continue agreeable to one another.” The implication was that, in her own failed marriage, she might have divorced Perez if the option were available—the parties having ceased to be agreeable. In the fictitious world of her “Indian Tale,”



Ouâbi's bride, Azakia, had greater liberties to follow her heart and leave her husband than did either men or women of the early republic.

Through the storytelling device of an American noble savage, Morton crafted her literary *riposte* to Brown, to Boston, and to the nation. While under the pseudonymous "veil" of Philenia, she at last had her say about the Morton-Apthorp affair. In that respect the epic tale was both a public acknowledgment and an explanation of her part in the scandal. She succeeded on two levels. By utilizing the text as a reply to the locally publicized assaults leveled against her and her family the year before, Morton answered her Boston critics. Beyond that, *Ouâbi* addressed broader concerns. With the book's publication, Morton also participated in a larger "literary war over ideas about the nature and the shape of the American character."

With *Ouâbi*'s release, Morton's systematic self-fashioning commenced in earnest. No longer fettered by the restraints of her husband, who appeared to have simply looked the other way after his own vice was exposed, Morton launched a sort of public-relations campaign that she continued throughout the rest of her life. These calculated efforts of the budding American salonniere made it possible for Morton to transit a liminal area between the public and private spheres, enabling her to inhabit the conventionally masculine world of ideas as an American *femme savant*.

### **Salons American Style: Morton's "Sky Parlor" and the Pseudo-Public Sphere**

Although salon practices were diverse—between England and France, between

Europe and America, even from Philadelphia to Boston—one constant remained. What is striking about these assemblies is that they were presided over by women, a rare example of female control in a literary realm. European salon culture was always a space where women asserted their prerogative and where the woman of ideas in particular held court. Cultivated and influential republican women were determined to carve out similar posts for themselves in the New World. Heterogeneous and collaborative in nature, gatherings such as those Morton hosted at “The Pavilion” encouraged audience participation and interaction among all present. The semiprivate nature of the domestic surroundings permitted women and men to freely exchange ideas with educated individuals; their conversation was characterized by a blend of wit and oral brilliance, with topics ranging from matters of literary and social taste to, increasingly, political issues. However, these environments were also the locus for much of republican manuscript culture. For the less-schooled attendees, the salon acted as an informal university in which participants recited passages from original works and listened to the writings of others. Guests from various backgrounds regularly proffered their literary and theoretical opinions about popular publications of the day as they mounted criticisms of the poems that were read aloud or of the plays that were performed.

Historians have often defined the woman’s role in the salon as that of the sophisticated and intelligent hostess, but the construction had more than a social function for many women. This was certainly true in the case of Morton, who used the platform to

voice her ideas on an array of subjects. Until quite recently, historians have only superficially addressed the American *salonniere*, ignoring many. Such inattention has reinforced an academic neglect of many influential female educators, writers, and intellectuals who raised their voices during the nation's founding years.

More current scholarship, notably the work of Vietto and Shields, has contributed to a renewed focus on republican manuscript culture, emphasizing its highly social and performative components while challenging the presumptive hierarchy and the division among texts that were unpublished, or private, and those printed, or public, works. Vietto specifically points to the limitations of such approaches to female "authorship that privilege print and individualistic, Romantic ideals of authorship," suggesting that a broader view of contemporary literary practices is necessary to tell the entire story of women and republican literature. An alternative vision takes into account the motivations—social, civic, commercial—for writing at all as well as the recognition that manuscript and print cultures often commingled, particular in semi-public settings such as the salon and through clubs like the Sans Souci. The intimate afternoons at Morton's "sky parlor" and in the homes of cultivated women throughout the republic were ideal venues for male and female authors to demonstrate their literary or theatrical acumen. For the women writers in attendance, these "presumably private performances" could function as a type of "public performance equivalent to publication" itself.

Morton and the other late-eighteenth-century women, including Dolley Madison

and, to a degree, Abigail Adams, who initiated such events developed their own salon styles with individualized formats and modes of conversation. Most notably and self-consciously European, Philadelphia's Anne Willing Bingham created a haven in her drawing room where politics, art, and economics were discussed by men and women of influence "after the fashion of Paris." At Dorchester, Morton engineered her own pseudo-public sphere, operating as an American *salonniere* in an atmosphere in which the seat of authority resided decidedly with the woman. Hers was an amalgamation of the French and British models applied to the bustling context of revolutionary Boston. In Morton's domain, she insisted upon addressing her attention, writings, and conversations equally to male and female readers and guests.

Morton's prose piece "The World at Large" offers a glimpse into her personal style as a *salonniere* and conversationalist. She presented a sort of how-to manual for the art of pleasing conversation, the overriding principle of which was the importance of knowing one's audience and steering the conversation toward suitable concerns. Not surprisingly, given her own harrowing experience with gossip, she advocated discussions that were "*not of persons*, but of events, of talents, of taste, or of improvements where appropriate." Still stinging from her public humiliation, Morton would have no such idle talk when she was officially in charge.

The following chapter explores more fully the dynamic nature of that public world of ideas—the paradoxical conditions present during the early republican era that served to

both invite and exclude women like Morton from participating in the public conversation.

Morton's body of work reveals an equal preoccupation with affairs of the head—including the future of the republic—and affairs of the heart. Like many writers and artists of the period, Morton was deeply concerned about the shape of the new government and the form of the body politic. However, it is for the more scandalous affairs of the heart that she would ultimately be remembered. As did Gilbert Stuart in his portraits, Morton played an active part in helping to fashion the iconic ideals that formed the foundation of American national identity.

## Chapter Two

### Keeping Up Appearances: The Public Face, the Printed Word, and the Spectacle of the Private

“Farce, and no Scandal, is a Farce indeed.  
Know, slander-loving readers, great and small,  
We scorn on private characters to fall. ...”  
— Anonymous

These lines first appeared in the February 21, 1789, issue of the *Massachusetts Centinel* as part of an advertisement for a short farce that were to be offered for sale the following week. The suggestive snippet was taken from *Occurrences of the Times. Or, The Transactions of Four Days. Viz.—From Friday the 16<sup>th</sup>, to Monday the 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1789. A Farce. In Two Acts*. In an effort to drum up interest in this dramatic satire, the publishers provocatively promised to deliver “scandal” to Boston’s “slander-loving” readers and timed the release to capitalize on the Morton-Apthorp affair—one of New England’s earliest such ignominious episodes. The announcement’s closing line, “[w]e scorn on private characters to fall,” would have left little doubt in the minds of Boston readers “great and small” regarding the targets of the satire.

By the time this farce came up for sale, Sarah Morton and her husband were hardly “private characters.” She was a widely published, outspoken writer and American *salonniere* in training, a public woman during an era when the rhetoric of femininity discouraged visibility of any kind, when being seen (or heard, for that matter) was considered immodest for a woman—unnatural, even immoral. Her husband Perez was a

charismatic, if pompous, opposition-party politician whose first impression inspired either devotion or derision, though rarely a response in between. William Dunlap, an astute observer of the American scene, recorded his assessment of Perez in a diary entry from 1797, wryly noting that “he talks so much of himself at his house and attributes it to the wine.” Dunlap’s estimation of the man was shared by many of Sarah Morton’s friends. In addition to the vulnerabilities intrinsic to each of the couple’s public personalities, their private affairs were common knowledge to Boston readers. The Mortons were easy marks.

The shocking revelations of the Morton-Apthorp scandal had been front-page news only a few months earlier, when the exposure of the adulterous liaison between Perez, a notorious flirt, and his wife’s comely younger sister, Fanny Apthorp, was aggressively covered by the press. The calamity was only further compounded when Fanny committed suicide in the very home where the betrayal had transpired. For months, Boston was abuzz. Brown’s sentimental drama, *The Power of Sympathy*, was already in its second printing, and the publication of *Occurrences of the Times* reignited public curiosity about an episode that both families wished to put behind them. The couple had long been fodder for a reading public only too eager to peer behind the doors of their imposing King Street mansion.

Local gossip about the clandestine relations had just begun to subside when the flimsy farce came up for purchase. The author of *Occurrences of the Times* (as I will refer to the document from here forward) is unknown, though apparently no fan of either Mr. or

Mrs. Morton. Both the tawdry *Power of Sympathy* and *Occurrences of the Times* exemplified the taste for the sordid that characterized Boston in the late decades of the eighteenth century. Each of the poorly written offerings was published, sold, and eagerly consumed by a scandal-loving public attracted to the prurient.

Based upon the real-life happenings in the Morton household over an intense four-day period in January 1789, *Occurrences of the Times*, in which the Mortons were caricatured as Mr. and Mrs. “Sidney,” was likely composed by someone with insider access. The story begins with the arrival of Sarah’s brother Charles, the oldest of the ten Apthorp children and an officer in the British navy, who had been abroad when the illicit affair unraveled. Devastated to learn of both the sudden death of his dear little sister and newly circulating rumors surrounding her illegitimate pregnancy, Apthorp was overwrought. Once he appeared on the scene, the affronted lieutenant wasted little time making things right. His realization that the private imbroglio had become all-too-public information only enraged him further, and, in an effort to avenge his sister’s death, and—equally important, the family honor—the noble Apthorp did what was expected of him, immediately challenging his philandering brother-in-law to a duel. This installment of Morton’s domestic melodrama transpired over the course of four days—hence the rather palaverous title of the farce.

Act One opens at dawn, the appointed morning of the duel, with Mr. Sidney attempting some last-minute machinations designed to evade the gunfight. Throughout the



short drama, the prime objective of the cowardly Sidney was to maneuver his way out of the contest while somehow keeping his cherished reputation intact—a tricky proposition. Untroubled by Mrs. Sidney’s delicate position as both wife and sister to the duelists involved, Mr. Sidney ignored her private turmoil. The coldness of the fictional Mr. Sidney paralleled accounts of Perez Morton’s disposition at Apthorp Mansion in the days following the revelation of his adulterous and incestuous tryst. Morton’s disregard for his wife’s anguish, when she had lost not only a sister but also her faith in her husband, left her disillusioned. It soon became apparent that, in line with the posture of his farcical twin, the primary concern of Perez was for his image in the public eye. Perez’s widely publicized betrayal, as exemplified through this play, profoundly influenced Morton’s development as a writer. Themes of fidelity, rejection, suspicion, and ulterior motives—falsity in any form—pervaded Morton’s poetry and prose from that point forward.

Evidently equally insensitive to the position of his brother-in-law, Sidney took every opportunity to deride his worthy challenger. While in conversation with Mrs. Sidney, the fictional Perez consistently volleyed insults at his opponent, Harcourt, the Charles Apthorp character in the tale. Among his verbal taunts was the emasculating *puppy*, a term that at the time would have been roundly perceived as an incendiary slur. In *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*, political historian Joanne B. Freeman includes *puppy* on her list of “fighting words” in the dueling code of honor, along with *rascal*, *scoundrel*, *liar*, and *coward*. All of these insults implied an immediate and

serious challenge, striking at the core of republican notions of manliness and gentility.

Further, “anyone who hurled them at an opponent,” Freeman adds, “was risking his life.”

While Sidney was portrayed as the instigator of the altercation, he nevertheless insisted that he and his wife present a united front in their public response to the duel. Mirroring Mrs. Morton’s public loyalty to her faithless husband (and to her sister), Mrs. Sidney obliged. However, privately, the real-life Morton would always hold this indiscretion against him. Like Perez, Sidney was motivated above all else by self-preservation, frankly declaring on the morning of the duel, “[w]e must have an eye for appearances.” Even in the face of imminent death, it seems, one’s reputation must be properly managed.

The satire continued in this vein, ruthlessly lampooning Sidney and all the while publicly impugning Mr. Morton’s already tarnished honor. For Perez, his tenuous respectability would have been difficult, yet imperative, to restore. During America’s early national period, a man’s personal honor—or at least its public appearance—was the foundation of male identity. A gentleman without honor was not only no gentleman but no man at all, and perhaps nowhere was this truer than in the arena of republican politics. For those in leadership positions during the republic, the cultivation of civility among all citizens was deemed critical for the success of the nation to prevent slipping into tyranny or even anarchy. The tenets of civic virtue dictated honorable and dishonorable behaviors—virtue and vice—between persons and groups and especially in public affairs. Public men

whose eyes were set on making a name for themselves in the national government were distinctly aware that “honor was entirely other-directed, determined before the eyes of the world; it did not exist unless bestowed by others.” In the case of Perez, who enjoyed nothing more than worldly approbation, the appearance of virtue bestowed its own rewards.

Perez was a survivor, and, like his satirical double, Mr. Sidney, the flesh-and-blood Morton successfully evaded the crosshairs of Charles Apthorp. From what can be pieced together from a variety of contemporary sources, including Morton’s writings, the loosely fictionalized *Occurrences of the Times*, and press coverage of the unrealized duel in Boston newspapers over those four days, it appears that Mr. Morton craftily managed to avoid the conflict by arriving, unarmed, at the appointed site of the challenge, flanked by two secretly armed consorts. Whatever the case, the literary account of the duel between Harcourt and Sidney illustrates well the significance of personal honor that held sway during the early American republic.

For his wife, a rather imposing literary and social figure, the publication of *Occurrences of the Times* was devastatingly humiliating and, because of her high visibility in the American republic of letters, perhaps doubly so. Though Perez was the principal object of the loosely disguised farce, the unnamed author also took a vicious jab at then-pregnant Sarah Morton, implying that the child she was carrying was the product of an extramarital liaison—an intimation that was most certainly an outrage to the prominent

couple. Between eyebrow-raising performances as an intellectual and literary figure and the immodest semi-public displays cultivated within the environs of her heterosocial salon, Morton was pushing the envelope of feminine propriety. During the years of the republic, a mere hint of unseemliness, publicity (or public-ness) of any kind, could forever stain a woman's reputation, and a highly publicized scandal could mean certain social death if not handled properly—a reality not lost on the publishers of *Occurrences of the Times*.

### **Reputation and the Word: Republican Virtue on Parade and in Print**

The courtly conventions associated with honor codes are traceable to medieval times. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries across much of western Europe, a romanticized cult of honor captured the popular imagination. In the American republic, its arcane ritualized codes of behavior found expression in a preoccupation with individual rank, character, reputation, and displays of public virtue. And like so many virtual social frameworks, virtue and honor were conceptual ideals, something for which citizens should strive, not necessarily a reflection of the manner in which real Americans conducted their daily lives. At the same time, in a democratic context, open and free musings on the subject of such abstractions were a necessity in the formation of a national identity as well as for the future of the country. Democratic ideals and notions of public virtue were aspirational in nature—like the republic itself.

David S. Shields accounts for the renewed emphasis on codes of honor during the post-revolutionary years by suggesting that the altered circumstances and social fusion of society “amplified the importance of manners and a civil tongue.” An obsession with civility that came to a head in the 1790s, this anxiety was particularly visible among political and, to a lesser degree, intellectual figures who were engaged in defining the terms of national identity. The discourse on American civility and virtue originated from a matrix of unknowns: American fears of cultural inferiority in comparison with Europe as well as perceived superiority to the native population, a response to the incivility of republican politics, and the discernible social friction emanating from public encounters between the sexes. Though male citizens were its only official participants, the political arena mirrored concerns of the culture at large, in which keeping up appearances was crucial.

Early national Boston, a bustling port town with a population of close to 20,000 citizens hailing from a multiplicity of origins, was one of the epicenters where citizens hammered out the particulars of these pressing matters. There, the unfinished business of the American Revolution was still on the table, Enlightenment concepts such as *democracy*, *liberty*, and *equality* were widely debated, and local discussions about the shape and form of the new government were among the most vibrant. Boston’s press played host and mediator to these energetic deliberations, and the topic was frequently front-page news. These public conversations culminated in a common goal—a cohesive national identity. However, for the republican experiment to succeed, popular trust in the leaders of the still-

evolving nation was imperative. The dynamic cultural landscape, particularly in urban hubs such as Boston, was inhabited by hordes of unfamiliar faces with unpredictable alliances, so practical matters like the continuity of the social order were especially pressing.

As a result, it was incumbent upon men such as Perez, who were involved in local government, to project a virtuous public image. They were, after all, the standard-bearers for the rest of the body politic, a role promising national acclaim yet requiring public duty—a prodigious responsibility, for, as Joyce Appleby contends in *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans*, families and tradition-bound loyalties exerted less and less influence on the behaviors and choices of the post-revolutionary populace. Further, this unprecedented cohort must have “recognized their own good fortune in being the heirs of a revolution they did not have to fight.” Consequently, younger generations increasingly began to look to their peers, as opposed to their forebears, for models of behavior as they worked through the implications of independence and engaged with the still-novel ideology of democracy.

The attenuated nature of the young republic necessitated public virtue from its leaders—one’s reputation was all one had. This is not to imply, however, that prominent public figures made any radical adjustments to the manner in which they conducted their personal affairs; rhetorical transformations would suffice. Accordingly, it was often the case, as one newspaper editor from the 1780s commented, that “men of neither *honour*, *honesty*, nor *decency*” were regularly heard “talking of *virtue* or *merit*.” Public opinion,

then as now a fickle bedfellow, could determine success or failure on both the political and personal stage, and the two seemed always to be in precarious balance. For ambitious politicians like Perez Morton, whose affiliation with the Democratic-Republicans automatically made him slightly suspect, keeping up appearances was not only a matter of personal honor—it was his job.

It was in this context that the cult of honor experienced a new vogue. The sensibility was perhaps most fully articulated in the world of politics, inaugurating an era that Freeman has characterized as marked by “anxious extremes.” When would-be politicians were “scrutinized on all sides by a widespread audience,” with the fate of the republic as well as their “reputations hanging in the balance,” national politicians lived a “self-conscious existence.” A set of ritualized codes of behavior rose to prominence in the political public sphere, designed to confer republican values upon its adherents and placing a premium on ideals such as reputation, character, and displays of public virtue.

During the republican era, the Boston public sphere was a crowded and combative playing field. The zeal of its contestants was particularly pronounced when it came to the hotly debated question regarding the constituents of native American virtue. Without an external foe such as the British or their Tory sympathizers—the enemy within—to provide contrast, Waldstreicher explains, it became necessary to locate and, in the case of *vice*, root out the “sources of virtue and corruption” on American soil in “order to see which [characteristic] would last and to learn how to identify either by sight.” In this context, the

conspicuous Mortons and their attendant social whirl were hard to miss.

### The Paradox of the Period: Classical Virtue and Popular Demand in a Modern Republic

In theory, a democratic republic operated free of monarchical restraints; the superficial signifiers of social status that long distinguished the aristocracies of Europe would not apply to America's modern republic. Despite the egalitarianism of their rhetoric, many among the late-eighteenth-century political and social superstructure, nevertheless, wanted to make clear who was on the top rung of the power ladder, robustly condemning any pretense among the middling sorts to social position beyond their actual status. In their view, level-jumping, through presumptive choices in costume or coiffure, was inadvisable. In actual practice, sumptuary legislation—designed to regulate inappropriate displays in hairstyle, apparel, and even the appetite via restrictions on food and drink—was still in place in late eighteenth-century Massachusetts. Though these strictures were largely a holdover from the colonial era, many states reinstated such laws in the early years of the republic as a remedy to the perceived dangerous excess of the times. At the 1787 Constitutional Convention, a Virginia representative, George Mason, proposed to grant to the federal government the authority to enact sumptuary legislation. Though this motion did not pass, Mason was hardly alone in his concern regarding a mounting excessive consumption among all strata of society.

Paradoxically, many among the elite themselves had long freely indulged in less-



than-ascetic conduct without attracting much notice. But as those members from society's lower stations increasingly reveled in freedom's bounty, those in positions of power swiftly modulated their tune. Within the circle of the Mortons and their powerful cohort, a palpable anxiety arose surrounding a nexus of ideas relating to social hierarchies and the exterior signifiers of status. Thus an uneasiness surfaced—really, a communal dread—that artful impostors might slip through undetected. For those few residing in American society's upper ranks—and given the tenuous nature of this first modern republic—impostors simply could not be tolerated. The Morton pair exemplified this generalized disquietude among the second-generation republican-era gentility and are among an assemblage of socialites parodied in *Sans Souci, Alias Free and Easy: or an Evening's Peep into a Polite Circle*. In the short farce, discussed in the next section, an unnamed author criticized the well-born Mortons and their high-living compeers for what was viewed by many as unrepublican deportment.

One result of this anxiety among society's top ranks necessitated the creation of what Richard D. Brown calls a “mirror of politeness”—a mirror provided only upon one's entrée into “elite information networks,” a looking glass which both established and reflected the standards and sanctions of high society. T. H. Breen has also explored this generalized social tension, explaining that as the Mortons and their peers saw it, the responsibility for the cohesion of society fell to “people of genuine worth [who] ruled over those who remained vulgar and lower class no matter how tasteful the cut of their

garments.” No matter how polite an individual’s reflection in the mirror may have appeared, the surface trappings of refinement alone were insufficient documentation of social worth.

Consequently, republican gentlemen and women were expected to project positive, even edifying, public images, to set “examples of acceptable public behavior for the less affluent and base-born.” However the “base-born,” who comprised the bulk of the American population, had to be careful not to follow the examples of their “betters” too closely. Counterfeits had become more and more difficult to spot, and any pretense in manners or appropriation of costume from those among the lower ranks would only complicate the increasingly vexing social fluidity. In Boston and other metropolitan centers across the new nation, then, the attributes of honor and public virtue took on added social weight.

In *Affairs of Honor*, Freeman observes of the American political scene that “politics, power, and character assassination go hand in hand in many times and cultures, and gossip . . . greas[ed] the wheels of governance.” Early republican Boston was no exception. The community was distinguished by the prevalence of gossip (political and otherwise), avid community participation, involvement with the printed word in its many manifestations, and a preoccupation with the ideals of reputation and virtue. Keeping up appearances was paramount, particularly when the eyes of the entire world were watching, as the nation’s leaders emphatically felt was the case. Peruse almost any paper from the

period, and a consistent theme emerges: the whole world is watching, so be on your best behavior. This sense of self-importance contributed to a millennial perspective that pervaded republican culture. For instance, an October 4, 1778, editorial from *The*

*Massachusetts Centinel*, opened with this stirring declaration:

No people yet known in history have appeared on the great theatre of human affairs, with such illustrious magnanimity as those of the United States of America . . .

The “illustrious magnanimity” of those republican leaders would be tested in the years that followed. The same figures who on one day were exalted on the public stage might awaken the next to find themselves disparaged in the popular press. Members of the select Sans Souci Club, including founders Sarah and Perez Morton, experienced firsthand the uncertain appetites of their era’s protean print culture.

### **Slander-Loving Readers and the *Sans Souci*: Chronicling the *Bon Temps* of Boston’s *Beau Monde***

Even before the lurid accounts of the Morton-Apthorp affair surfaced in 1788, the *modus vivendi* of Sarah and Perez Morton had attracted the notice of the local press and of Boston readers. The Morton name had initially begun to acquire a sensationalistic patina a few years earlier, when, during the winter of 1784 and through the early months of 1785, a veritable “tempest in a teapot” erupted in town. In an attempt to enliven nightlife in post-revolutionary Boston, Sarah Morton and her epicurean friend Hepzibah Swan concocted what they referred to as, innocently enough, a “Tea Assembly,” and as a consequence they

became unwitting *provocateurs* in a high-profile republican-era paper war.

Calling themselves the “Sans Souci Club,” the select and sybaritic—by contemporary standards—members of the private club were devoted to festivities considered by more conservative Bostonians to be idle amusements. The roster of the pleasure-loving circle included—in addition to the Mortons and the Swans, who were known Francophiles—lawyer Harrison Gray Otis, Isaac Winslow, an intemperate Robert Treat Paine, Jr., and the rakish Samuel Jarvis. Many among the assembly, including the Mortons, were the beneficiaries of the patriotic sacrifices of their distinguished forebears. The Sans Souci regularly convened for dancing, gaming, and card-playing—frivolities which were frowned upon by the comparatively somber public figures of the generation before. While the organizers of the group were blasé, one founder blithely describing their entertainments as a “very harmless meeting, decent even to dullness,” many among Boston’s old guard were up in arms over the group’s perceived licentious proceedings.

The group’s selection of a French name, the Sans Souci Club, did not help the matter. For seven years, from 1777 through 1784, the citizens of Boston had lived with a squadron of the French navy deployed in Boston Harbor. This indignity merely added fuel to the public fire of anti-French sentiment among Boston’s already largely Federalist population. Community exposure to the seemingly ineludible (and doubtless tempting to some) French values, which many conservatives saw as morally bankrupt, decadent to the point of degeneracy, was widely considered a source of the younger generation’s perceived

excesses. For republican readers, the elite assemblage amounted to a *cause celebre*.

Boston's overfilled public arena was teeming during those years. Players and spectators alike were fascinated by the Sans Souci and its lavish entertainments. American displays of self-indulgence, especially when enhanced by a French accent, made for titillating reading. Local newspapers were quick to latch on to the brewing controversy, making the provocative group a local phenomenon, accusing its members of all sorts of indiscretions. Letters from outraged citizens appeared in newspapers and circulars, incriminating the group for everything from decadence and degeneracy to the destruction of the moral fiber and government of the nation. As charter members of the morally corrosive group, by that point considered positively hedonistic, the Mortons found themselves—for perhaps the first time, though hardly the last—roundly derided in the public press.

In a series of articles written by an “Observer,” allegedly the pseudonymous patriot Samuel Adams, in the *Massachusetts Centinel* beginning in January 1785, the private club was aggressively besieged in print. The offended “Observer” went so far as to call for the club's disbandment. Although historians, most notably Gordon S. Wood, have ably addressed the abiding concern about the extravagance and luxury of the second generation, some analysis bears repeating here. From the very outset of independence, many of the nation's more ideological founders had discounted popular American virtue as “irreconcilable with classical republican ideals,” and, for dyed-in-the-wool republicans, what they saw as the full-scale “scrambling of people to satisfy private wants and

aspirations” became a “vindication of their doubts.” For high-visibility scramblers such as Sarah and Perez Morton, “private wants” were eventually the source of their public undoing.

The Sans Souci—with its emphasis on fancy dress, conspicuous consumption, and exhibitions of the latest, largely European, dance trends—epitomized for many the young nation’s slide into vice and dissipation. The best interests of the republic, it was feared, were eroding in the face of rampant individual ambition and vainglorious pursuits. If members of the old guard were up in arms, they felt it was with good reason. Wood sums up their mood succinctly: “this was no trivial debate. The issue at stake was nothing less than the nature of American society.” Founding father figures Samuel and John Adams and writer-patriot Mercy Otis Warren were by no means alone in their distress; their exhortations resonated with many, and they were joined in their outcry by those less-liberal factions of the younger set.

Just two years after independence was declared, many citizens had already begun to hear bells tolling the death of the republic. In 1778, General James Warren mused about their native Boston to Samuel Adams: “all manner of extravagance prevails here in dress, furniture, equipage and living. . . . How long the manners of this people will be uncorrupted and fit to enjoy that liberty that you have long contended for, I know not.” Adams evidently concurred, for the following year, in correspondence with Warren, the former expounded at length upon that “inundation of levity, vanity, luxury, dissipation, and,

indeed vice of every kind, which, I am informed, threatens the country.” Adams’ informant remains unnamed, but it seems that he had a well-placed source.

The perennially prickly John Adams, for his part, never hesitated to rail against the vices of his fellow Bostonians. By 1785, when the *Sans Souci* was in full swing, the priggish future president had clearly had enough. In a letter to Mercy Otis Warren, Adams warned that the “follies and frivolities of our countrymen [were] too serious to be ridiculous” and that they should “deplore that spirit of dissipation, vanity and knavery, which infects so many Americans and threatens to ruin our manners and liberties.” Then he delivered the coup de grace: “in imitation of the old world.” Another example of the seriousness of the matter of American moral decline comes from one apocalyptic Adams (Sam) to another (John): “too many of the citizens throughout the Commonwealth are imitating the Britons in every idle amusement and expensive foppery which it is in their power to invent for the destruction of a young country.” Perplexed, he further wondered, “Can our people expect to indulge themselves in the unbounded use of every unmeaning and fantastick [sic] extravagance because they would follow the lead of Europeans, and not spend all their money?” *Frivolity* and *foppery* did not exactly square with republican frugality and modesty.

The waspish public drama swarming around the controversial club reached its apex with the 1785 publication of *Sans Souci, Alias Free and Easy: or an Evening’s Peep into a Polite Circle, an Intire[sic] New Entertainment in Three Acts*, a twenty-four-page farce

satirizing the manners and mores of the Boston *beau monde*. The setting for the unimaginative yet venomous satire was one of the group's evening gatherings. In attendance were the Mortons, loosely disguised as "Mr." and "Madame Importance," who were parading about in the illustrious company of Boston's emerging illuminati. Morton's new name, "Madame Importance," was not a designation that she would have chosen for herself.

The "Importance" couple was a pretentious pair: the husband was a self-promoting braggart; his wife mocked as a superior snob. Unflattering characters both, together they were the self-appointed gate-keepers of Boston's social pecking order. French phrases dot their dialogue throughout, and the Mortons' parodied versions proudly flaunted their anti-republican perspectives, particularly in regard to hierarchies of rank and station. More to the point, Mr. and Madame Importance preferred that the elite station to which they belonged remain elite. If the French-leaning posture accorded Perez's character was founded in some truth, in the case of Sarah Morton, an outspoken Federalist, the characterization was patently dishonest. Throughout the drama, the private society with the French name was depicted as dangerously European or, in the words of John Adams, "in imitation of the old world." Boston's *beau monde* was satirized as shallow and utterly self-absorbed; comprised of literary versions of Freeman's "self-conscious strivers," the whole lot was "obsessively concerned with their own reputations." Prior to the exposé of the Morton-Apthorp affair in 1789, the glamorous couple—who may have appeared "free and



easy” to Boston’s brimming reading public—were, as this satire portends, already on the eve of becoming the press darlings that everyone loved to hate. First, however, republicans had to learn how to read.

### **What News?: Literacy and Cultural Transformation in the Republic of Readers**

In the decades following the radical political overthrow of the British Crown, the citizens of the newly sovereign nation were in the midst of an equally transformative revolution involving the printed word. The republican era signaled a paradigmatic shift in the individual’s relationship to power, which located public authority in the written, as opposed to the spoken, word. For centuries, oral traditions such as those propped up by the aristocracies of Europe discouraged literacy, as well as the subsequent access to knowledge that it implied, among the disenfranchised lower classes, leaving most members of society on the outside looking in. Lineage—not ambition or merit—was the price of admission. Americans, by contrast, faced no legal or social obstacles barring their entrance into the new world of letters; nor was there a longstanding spoken-word legacy to first overthrow. Following independence, the formerly rigid power dynamic assumed a more fluid and permeable state, a condition that was buttressed by a dramatic expansion in literacy and matched by an accelerating print universe.

The readership of republican Boston during those years represented a microcosm of this larger cultural phenomenon, which often found expression in the colloquialisms of the times. For instance, today we say “What’s new?” interchangeably with “How are you?”

The now-common greeting appears to be a variation of a popular eighteenth-century salutation: “What news?” Though minor, the difference in the two queries is telling. The postmodern emphasis is on the new, on novelty; the earlier version prioritized the news, underscoring the importance of keeping up with the comings and goings—the news, that is—of one’s neighbors and contemporaries, social and political. Ultimately, the success of the republic depended upon an informed, literate populace that recognized the importance of staying abreast of the events of the day.

In his foundational three-volume study of the American experience, Daniel J. Boorstin assesses the broad reading and writing capabilities of the populace since the “nation’s birth,” asserting that from “colonial times, literacy had been more widespread than in the mother country.” Boorstin’s contention is founded on the notion of American newness—with no inherited social hierarchies impeding the progress of citizens from any stratum, Americans outstepped those historically entrenched forebears they had left behind. Though the evolution of literacy was, of course, more nuanced, citizens of the republic were off to a running start. Or, as Joseph J. Ellis elucidates in *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture*, a greater proportion of the populace of late-eighteenth-century Americans were potential readers than was the case in any other nation in the world. This development was a result of both the widespread technical ability to read as well as the reality that a larger percentage of readers possessed sufficient means to purchase the many readily available (and affordable) printed materials.

Though definitive literacy rates are difficult to determine, most scholars point to the ability to write one's name (rather than just making a mark or an "X") as its primary indicator, citing signed documents such as deeds and wills as evidence. Accepting this premise suggests that, by the end of the eighteenth century, there was a literacy rate—excluding Native Americans and African Americans—of at least 75 to 80 percent for both men and women. Recent scholarship that takes into account historical research as well as new critical theories challenges long-held assumptions regarding the relationship between literacy and social change. The transformative potential as well as the necessity of literacy for upward mobility during the early republic suggests that the ability to read and write was essential for modernism to take hold. Literacy and its flowering spawned intellectual, emotional, and political as well as spiritual paradigm shifts; its implications in a democratic environment are ongoing.

The Enlightenment ideology of the era, technological innovations in the postal and transportation systems, and a nascent capitalist economy were essential to the transformative process wrought by literacy. Overarching all of these factors, the widespread Protestant faith was highly instrumental in the proliferation of American literacy. Protestantism, both in the colonies and later during the republic, was largely characterized by individual—as opposed to mediated—piety. Protestant leaders of various denominations dictated that its practitioners read the Bible, the "word of God," for themselves. Prominent New England preachers like Timothy Dwight and, later, his

disciple Lyman Beecher sermonized about the “centrality of the Bible and the absolute necessity of conversion to the proper comprehension of God’s laws.” In such a context, basic reading and writing skills became vessels for personal salvation while literacy simultaneously, and likely inadvertently, opened the eyes of believers to all sorts of irreverent reading materials.

Consequently, across the nation an exponentially expanding Protestant faith was sowing the seeds of an awakening that included temporal rewards outside the ethereal plane. By the end of the eighteenth century, Americans were in the throes of an enlightenment brought about through literacy and personal experiences with the written word. Literacy was particularly pronounced among European settlers, and as a result, the British—and to an even greater degree the French and German émigrés who made the move to America—were often more literate than the people of the homelands they left behind. This enlarged reading public, however, was not reading solely to ensure spiritual salvation or even to participate in lively political debate—the more sensational the news, it seemed, the more they read. The omnivorous lot consumed all manner of printed material, with seemingly little or no regard for its elevating potential.

As a general rule, literacy rates were highest among white men, but by the latter part of the century, the tide was turning. Though the gender gap between male and female literacy was glaring throughout the colonies during the early decades of the 1700s, it shrank considerably over the course of the century. As Richard D. Brown has argued in

*Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865*, the belief in female literacy “emerged full blown in the 1790s when the ideal of republican motherhood was articulated.” Briefly, this ideological premise charged women with the responsibility of raising model republican children who would be the conscience of God, family, and country for the good of the nation and for the future of the republic. American patriots were not born but rather raised; this belief system emphasized the centrality of motherhood and early-childhood training, as it reaffirmed the importance of the republican home, of domesticity, to the future of the nation.

According to most accounts, women took the job seriously, and by the close of the eighteenth century, young men and women from many stations were reading and writing on a regular basis. Sarah Morton and other early American women of ideas represent the rather ambiguous product of this theoretical ideal when set into practical motion. These cultivated young women of the previous generation—privileged offspring of well-to-do parents, as in Morton’s case—were encouraged in their intellectual pursuits. Morton and her feminine peers had come of age during the revolutionary era, and in the auspicious years following independence, they, like their male counterparts, felt entitled by birth to certain liberties. Many, as was decidedly the case with the patriotic Morton, espoused the tenets of republican rhetoric wholeheartedly. However, women of her generation, whose formative years straddled the revolutionary and republican moments, often found it difficult, though not impossible, to discover acceptable social avenues to contribute to the

political and civic discourse.

Further pushing many public women back indoors, the discourse of domesticity surfaced in an attempt to circumscribe women's participation in the world of public affairs. Morton was both disappointed and perplexed by her sudden exclusion. While many future republican mothers dutifully followed the dictates of feminine private virtue, she contrived a means to stretch the bounds of propriety to suit her desires while still attending to national communal needs by raising children who upheld democratic values and acquired the requisite reading and writing skills needed to participate in the public forum.

It is also worth noting that, as a general rule, the rate of rapid rise in literacy—among women and men—and the concomitant growth of the print culture are ironically oftentimes the result of higher literacy rates. C. F. Kaestle explains this common trend in his study of the history of literacy:

As more people become literate, the amount of fiction circulating commercially will increase and newspapers will become cheaper; in a society where more reading material is available, there is more motivation for people to learn to read and to use their skills. Thus one of the effects of literacy at the societal level is that it fosters more literacy.

Greater literacy, then, fostered a populace that read more accounts of the opinions of others and wrote more about ideas of their own. Through letter-writing and letter-reading, ordinary people recorded and learned about the everyday news of their friends and families as they began forming their own original opinions. And republican readers were increasingly trying their hands at more imaginative styles of writing as well.

Literacy, most critically the act of writing, then, contributes to the development of an individual's personality, or sense of self, as it enables people to generate and give voice to original ideas. Additionally, eighteenth-century women who read fiction written in the epistolary style were themselves writing letters on a grander scale, an activity which encouraged self-discovery and the cultivation of an individual authorial voice. For example, in personal missives, eighteenth-century letter writers often assumed the identity of their favorite characters, writing to one other under the guise of a pseudonym drawn from epistolary novels. Carla Hesse has elegantly written on the subject: "writing enables us to separate ourselves from our ideas, to take possession of them, and to exchange them with others across space and time."

Original ideas as well as access to the opinions of others were critical developments in the maturation of a democratic *vox populi*. Boston's densely populated public sphere, animated as it was by a vocal and literate populace, engendered an ideal climate for revolutionary gestures of all sorts. Across the republic, the emboldening authority of literacy, along with the democratization of information that followed, helped usher in a revolutionary moment in which political power was increasingly in the hands of the individual. However, the individuals who set their sights on political fame—strivers such as Perez Morton—were not always the enlightened humanists that history tends to mythologize.

Literacy brought with it the then-radical idea that knowledge is power—a belief

made manifest through the example of Sarah Morton, whose dominion of influence, such as it was, in large part derived from her extensive education and her recognition of its potential. For literate women across the nation, the confluence of philosophical, technological, political, and experiential forces converged, creating the door through which the intrepid woman of ideas could make her calculated entrance. Though not exactly discreet, Morton's debut nonetheless set the stage for her lifelong occupation of the traditionally masculine world of ideas.

For America's female populace, the fluid literary environment of the early republic made available, in the words of Vietto, "radically different conceptions of authorship" for writers and readers alike, and many took advantage of the opportunity. Bostonians Morton, Murray, and Susanna Rowson are just a few of the female intellectuals who used the vehicle of print to experiment with various authorial postures, to voice their political and critical opinions, or to express themselves creatively; the peculiar transformations of literacy for American women who read and who wrote is addressed more fully in the following chapter.

### **Printing the Public: Making the News and the Newsworthy Subject**

Prior to a discussion about Morton and the challenges she faced as an intellectual woman in the public eye, it is necessary to revisit some of the peculiarities of the history of the American free press. Before independence, any news that came to the colonies was controlled by and filtered through the British Crown or local colonial governors. For



decades, the literature, printed news, and personal messages from London had transmitted more than mere information; they also served as conduits for the “standards by which men and events were judged.” Brown has nicely elaborated that these sanctioned and encoded communiqués functioned as “personal envoys from the European world,” conveying the “definition of sophistication.” However by the close of the 1700s, London no longer represented the locus of American economic and political activity, and the United States developed not only a government and politics all its own but a native press as well.

With the evolution of an American print culture, concepts like the republican honor code—a quaint vestige of Old World politics—were complicated by an ascendant New World impulse toward sensationalism and scandal-mongering. Of course, scandal and intrigue had animated court life in the aristocracies of Europe for hundreds of years, but in the embryonic republic, everyday citizens were beginning to enjoy similarly torrid, and previously privileged, tales. Even though during the early years in America, control of and access to information and opinions had historically been the province of a select circle of literate elites, by the last decades of the eighteenth century, the stranglehold had been dismantled by a rapidly multiplying, newly literate, and highly opinionated citizenry. Heretofore “elite information networks” were besieged by a population eager to take full advantage of the benefits to which they felt constitutionally entitled.

As restrictions on the press were lifted, publications of all varieties emerged throughout the states, and a unique print culture began to come into its own as well. After

the Revolution, the written word was delivered in more shapes and sizes than ever before: broadsides, pamphlets, newspapers, books, journals, circulars, letters, and cautionary tales, among others. The unprecedented access to printed materials was especially evident in New England seaports such as Boston, as the scattered settlement patterns throughout the South made wide-scale circulation more difficult. Because port towns were regional centers of commercial and political activity during the 1790s, information traveled more rapidly and was generally more complete there than in inland cities. Additionally, the growth of a national infrastructure, including improved road and postal services, along with the developing publishing technologies allowed for the accelerated circulation of information.

Significantly, the eighteenth century also saw the advent of modern capitalism, with printed materials factoring significantly in the rapidly expanding international market for consumer commodities. Advances in printing and the competition implicit in capitalist economies, as well as improvements in the transportation and postal systems, kept the word flowing at a rate most people had not previously experienced. In keeping with the paradigm of early American republicanism, a well-informed citizenry would follow political affairs, debate issues in a public forum, and provide a type of check on governmental corruption or excess. Public access to information was key.

Any discussion of the public sphere would be remiss without a nod to Jürgen Habermas, who, in his landmark book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public*

*Sphere* (1962), heralds the rise of the free press beginning in the seventeenth century.

Habermas rightly points to the critical role of print in bringing about a metamorphosis in political and civic life which presaged the democratic revolutions of the next century. By the close of the 1700s, access to information was no longer available only to habitués of the upper echelons of society. Residents of newly sovereign and democratic America could readily participate in national public conversations regarding the shape and form that their government would take.

In the years between the Revolutionary War and nationhood, the flourishing print culture began to take on a life of its own as the ideal of an independent republican sphere began to clash with the realities of popular opinion. Operating with little or no accountability and without the threat of monarchical censorship, the increasingly uncivil “fourth estate” became a force with which elected officials—and unwatchful citizens alike—had to reckon. The public press imposed a new set of responsibilities upon members of representative government during America’s earliest years. Prior to the early national years, representatives operated in a realm far removed from their constituencies, an arena in which official political news usually took some time before finding its way to their respective states. Suddenly, the word traveled fast—and, in the printing hub of Boston, very fast. More to the point, politics as a topic of conversation (local and national) had to compete for public attention with more entertaining, oftentimes sensationalistic, events.

### **Pressing Concerns: Vehicles of Knowledge or Vehicles for Self-promotion**

National political figures hailed the proliferation of the free press as a vital component of life in a democratic republic, and the primary outlet for political messages was the printed word. George Washington anticipated that magazines and papers might “spread through every city, town, and village,” heralding the publications as “vehicles of knowledge more happily calculated than any other to preserve the liberty, stimulate the industry, and ameliorate the morals of a free and enlightened people.” And today’s journalists are fond of quoting Thomas Jefferson on the subject: “[w]ere it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter” (1787). For these men and other Americans fearful of state-sponsored newspapers such as those that propped up European aristocracies, such idealistic proclamations regarding the press were common. Both Washington and Jefferson witnessed the accumulation of American print culture in their lifetimes, though the statesmen could not have anticipated the transformations it wrought.

As the primary delivery vehicles for politics as well as literature during the eighteenth century, the publications served as more than simply a loose forum in which political debate took place. In practice, local and national gazettes operated as the fundamental institutions of American political life. And America’s newly amplified republic of readers had no compunctions about communicating their dissent or dissatisfaction with the state of the union or with those leaders charged with upholding it.

At the same time, the transformation and expansion of the printing business allowed for more rapid diffusion of information throughout the country. Just thirty years before, only eighteen weekly and biweekly newspapers were published in the entire country, and those were in a handful of port towns. By contrast, at least 106 newspapers circulated inland and in coastal towns alike in 1790. Newspapers had sprung up in every state and every region as the principal vehicle by which reputations, political and otherwise, were created or dismantled.

The millennialism common to many republican founders affirmed that the birth of the nation was an event of global significance. Those in government believed that posterity would look back not just on their public policies and political texts but also their private, and ideally virtuous, behavior. Obsessively conscious of the fact that they were making history and certain that the eyes of the citizenry—indeed, the eyes of the whole world—were upon them, many politicians in the early days of the republic conducted themselves like “actors on a stage, hungry for the applause of their audience. Some strutted in fine clothes and paraded in carriages,” while others “took to wearing ceremonial swords. . . . Ambition ran high. All of these manufactured public displays were widely reported and faithfully followed in newspapers throughout the republic. In the case of Perez Morton, for example, the publication of his famed oratory at Warren’s funeral catapulted him onto the political stage.

Politicians who got star billing in this public political forum often entertained

grandiose expectations, and in the unpredictable public sphere, human frailties and their exposure in the press could take on dramatic dimensions. At the same time, more-media-savvy politicians realized the potential of print format not only as “vehicles of knowledge,” the role envisioned by the future first American president, but also as vehicles for self-promotion. Print had an added benefit at the time; most readers would have no way to check the facts—they were pleased to be reading at all. Accordingly, many office-seekers exploited that lack of accountability to serve their own ends, manufacturing whatever public image they pleased. Clever aspirants to political fame began to embellish their resumes with “fabrications” which they sent to their “hometown newspapers with impressive congressional speeches that had never been delivered.” Their constituents had no way of knowing whether the contents of these speeches were idle boasts, blustering rhetoric, or even calculated deception. The reader could choose to take his or her representative at his word, or not.

From its very inception, the culture of American politics grasped the potency of the printed word, and soon many public figures came to realize the effectiveness of manufacturing what Boorstin has termed the “pseudo-event” to manipulate their public image. Though his is a study of the modern public image, “pseudo-events” have a longstanding tradition in American government. Boorstin characterizes these staged episodes, which he delineates in *The Image*, as marked by being “planned” in advance rather than spontaneous, with the “immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced.” One needs look no further than the

early republican political stage for dramatization.

Then as now, the stakes were high. When one's reputation was all one had, why not utilize every asset to give it a public boost? Given that success or failure in the political arena rested largely upon one's reputation in the eyes of an increasingly literate public, it is no wonder a virtual obsession with honor and reputation held sway in the New World. Our optimistic first president could not have envisioned the eventual tabloidization of the press or the at-times engorged egos that originated from a political mind-set that emphasized the exceptionalism of its participants. Much literary and historical scholarship has elaborated on the multiple connections among national and local politics, the genesis of an American literature, and the rise of the republican print culture.

Beyond strictly political and literary platforms, these daily publications were the fabric that bound together American social and cultural life. Papers were the public sphere. In the case of the Morton-Apthorp affair, for example, the *Massachusetts Centinel* served as a sort of mediator among family members—a public go-between—when all other means of communication had ceased. Through following the daily news, an inquisitive populace kept up with not only the political affairs of the day by consuming, perhaps even contributing to, the flow of the printed word but also by following with equal fascination the news of their neighbors and fellow citizens.

### **Republican Readership: Audience Participation and the Myth of the Private Sphere**

If the fluid and progressively transparent realm of late eighteenth-century political

and print culture kept republican leaders on their best behavior, at least on paper, the ramifications for republican readers was equally transformative. Modern historians of the Enlightenment consistently point to the act of reading as one of the era's most significant contributions; the subsequent broadening of the public sphere is generally applauded as a necessary and vital component of life in a democracy. According to this view, then, the new bourgeois public sphere created a sort of neutral autonomous space untouchable by the state and by civil society—a semi-private zone where people could semi-publicly voice their opinions without fear of official censure.

A dynamic relationship between the public and private spheres has existed from the nation's founding, with each sphere of influence continually competing for dominance. The erosion of the boundaries between the personal and the publicized, the domestic interior and the worldly exterior environment, was already a reality during America's republican era—the walls between the public and the private began to crumble almost immediately. As a consequence, the same set of anxious extremes that had come to typify the character of the self-appointed national standard bearers, as well as those in their orbit, assumed implications well beyond the political stage.

In the highly politicized atmosphere of the early republic, the personal was, quite literally, the political. More was afoot than an erosion of the British monarchy; throughout the young nation the carefully constructed walls between the public and private spheres were also starting to crumble. The increasing porosity and the fluctuating nature of the



relationship across their imagined barriers fostered a fascination with scandal and gossip, and in the words of historian Bernard Bailyn, “mud-slinging invective was everywhere” in an “age when gross public accusations were commonplace.” A taste for controversy was increasingly contagious among Boston’s “slander-loving” readers, its residuals still alive and well in today’s tabloid press.

Habermas points to places such as coffeehouses, salons, taverns, and social clubs as locations where individuals might theoretically operate in safe zones outside of the prying eyes of the state. There, a free and democratic population could engage in everyday communicative practices. Ironically, the very privacy of these locales engendered a transformation of the public sphere and a cultivation of individual personalities while simultaneously supporting the development of artificial public personas. The Habermasian vision of free and ennobling public debate is all well and good until one remembers that participants from any era are human. While imbibing rum punch or nursing a pewter mug of beer at their local tavern, democratic individuals were free to converse on subjects of a lowly nature as well. Gossip, mud-slinging, and scandal-mongering were unintended consequences of an enlarged, literate, and increasingly vocal public sphere. The ideal of rational critical debate, a key feature of an enlightened public sphere, was a myth from the outset. For example, Boston’s tumultuous public response to the “Tea Assemblies” at the Sans Souci Club epitomized the social friction surrounding community participation in civic discourse.

The communal anxieties of the nation's leaders filtered down to a bulging and polymorphic republican readership: the same set of self-conscious strivings, the characteristic craving after attention, and vainglorious pursuits of frivolity in modes of dress and carriage soon found expression among the middling sorts of the culture at large—at least according to the observations of many of America's more conservative commentators. As discussed in an earlier section, the national experiment required those in higher stations to sublimate their individual desires for the good of the body politic—or at least create the appearance of such. However, this sort of rhetorical humility, it soon became apparent, tended to clash with the realities of life in a reputation-obsessed political and social culture.

Following the lead of those in office, a population of “self-absorbed, self-conscious strivers” emerged, many of whom were, like their exemplars, “obsessively concerned with their reputations.” An entire generation of Americans, among them the Mortons and their fancy friends, became progressively concerned with keeping up their own appearances. After all, no one wanted to be featured negatively in the latest edition. The rather double-edged quality of the power of print was soon apparent. With the ascendance of the print domain as a forum for unmediated civic exchange came the popular recognition among readers, in Boston and elsewhere, particularly as it applied to individual reputation, that the pen was truly mightier than the sword. Members of the populace quickly observed that the private lives of even average citizens could be almost instantly injected into the public

sphere.

Although instant celebrity was not necessarily undesirable, infamy was fraught with complications, as tales of the notorious from all stations of society kept the printing presses busy. Fanny Apthorp, for one, had no aspirations to fame, and largely as a result of her connections to those who did, her most private hours were broadcast for all to see. In 1790, Nancy Randolph, in an episode with many startling parallels to that of Fanny Apthorp, endured a similar process of defamation and tabloidization. From the prominent line of Virginia planters, Randolph was accused of incest, infanticide and miscegenation during her adult life. Her very public fall from grace offered a glimpse into the dismal future Apthorp would have had, had she not elected to end her life. Rather than endure a lifetime marred by ostracism and shame, in effect social suicide, Fanny chose the real thing: *Finis*.

Though Randolph and Apthorp came from families with national name recognition, the newspapers of the era also regularly carried accounts of the shocking doings of everyday citizens, and in lurid detail; descriptions of hangings, rapes, and murders were standard features in the print culture of the day. Clearly, the intrinsic contradiction between public virtue and private vice—and the concomitant hypocrisy—made for compelling (and profitable) reading. “Mud-slinging invective” did have a financial upside. American publishers were quick to appreciate and seize upon the negative potential of the press, realizing that the public sphere could also be used for ignoble purposes.

## Sentimental Journey: “Overstimulation,” the *Coeur Sensible*, and American Sensibility

America’s newly thriving print culture and exponentially expanding republican readership quickly presented an array of unanticipated problems. Paramount in the minds of many was the pernicious taste for European-style epistolary fiction and novels of sentiment that was taking hold among American readers, and the perceived corrosive effect that such texts might have on the fragile female mind. Thomas Jefferson bemoaned the “inordinate passion” for reading novels and the time lost that he felt could be otherwise instructively employed. More than that, Jefferson warned of the perils of long-term novel-reading, prophesying that “when this poison infects the mind, it destroys its tone and revolts it against wholesome reading.” His warnings went unheeded, as importation of sensual European fiction was on the rise, and, by the last years of the century, the American press had taken on a significantly more purple hue.

One British import that the Mortons and Aphorps would have preferred stay on the continent was the controversial “novel of sentiment.” For while Mrs. Morton both consumed and contributed to the genre, the work of William Hill Brown and its aftermath nearly consumed her. As the dominant literary form of the late eighteenth century in both Europe and America, the sentimental novel was novel largely because it appealed to an entirely unprecedented group of readers. The genre is one of the more consequential and widely studied developments arising from the rise of the free press and the expansion of the reading public. During what became known as the “Age of Sensibility,” the movement’s

socioeconomic foundations resided in the growing commercialism of the eighteenth-century experience and signaled an international shift in worldview. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the philosophical precepts born of the “Age of Sensibility” would have profound effects on constructions of American character—politically, socially, within the family, and through its expression in the literary and visual arts.

In eighteenth-century parlance, the sentimental ethos generally indicated an elevated or refined emotional response to art, literature, or human suffering based upon an individual’s *coeur sensible*, or “feeling heart.” Indeed, the very words *sensibility* and *sentiment* marked a paradigm shift emphasizing a new approach to reason and ideas in which true knowledge resided only in personal experience, affect, or emotion—grounded in human sensations. The novels, music, and poetry of the era reinforced the ethos of sensibility, often with unfavorable returns for female audiences.

In what was a decidedly irrational reaction to the rationalist philosophies of the Enlightenment, sentimental abstractions such as “feeling” and “sympathy” took on empirical importance and were regarded as the sole guides to the truth. As a naturalistic school of thought, sensibility located its physiological roots in the central nervous system and increasingly became associated with contemporary notions of the feminine. Characterized by melodrama, inordinate weeping, and emotional extremes of all sorts, the sentimental narrative style reflected the ideological movement’s prioritization of feelings, or “sentiments,” over logic and reason.

Sentimental fiction, usually printed in epistolary form in local newspapers, experienced a vogue around the middle of the century in Britain with the publication in 1740 of *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson, widely recognized as the first of its genre. As soon as English publishers identified a sizable American audience, sentimental novels and epistolary dramas made their journey across the Atlantic, where *Pamela* eventually became a bestseller, as did Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-1748) soon thereafter. Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) and *Tristram Shandy* (1759) were also top-selling imports that profited from an abundant American readership.

New World writers picked up their sentimental pens a little later in the century, but once they finally got on board, they wrote with an almost religious fervor. In their day, American novels of sentiment had to contend with a puritanical shadow that cast distrust over fiction for its corruptive tendency and the republican disapproval of novel-reading as an impediment to a valuable education. Conservative moralists condemned sentimental novels for their perceived tendency to overstimulate the imagination, and female readers were considered particularly susceptible to this effect. As a remedy for the controversial image of the genre in the context of a virtuous republic, enterprising authors promoted their work as cautionary tales intended for the edification and moral uplift of their readers. Consequently, American sentimental tales in the main are distinctive for their rather heavy-handed style that at first glance appears more didactic and propagandistic than that of their British forebears.

Brown's 1789 *The Power of Sympathy* is distinguished as the first novel written and published in North America by a native writer. Many others would soon follow. Sentimental fiction typically appeared in serialized, often epistolary, form in local newspapers, and eventually it was assumed to be most popular with American female readers. As a result the genre has become broadly, and dismissively, known as "woman's fiction." The term is a bit of a misnomer. Cathy Davidson has demonstrated that men accounted for a significant portion of the early novel's readership, suggesting that the figure is as high as one-third and further that men were likely the primary authors of that brand of fiction as well. Between 1789 and 1800 alone, American authors, male and female, penned more than thirty novels and hundreds more during the decades that followed. Like Brown, Hannah Foster based her 1797 novel, *The Coquette*, on a real-life incident of seduction and betrayal.

America's first huge sentimental seller, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*, was originally published in England in 1779, but the novel saw the first of many reprints in the United States in 1794. By that time, Rowson, a formidable intellect, had already abandoned novel-writing, preferring to become an educator and writer of history. Morton never wrote a sentimental novel *per se*, perhaps sensing that an association with the genre would diminish her authority as an intellectual. Her writing nevertheless was dramatically informed by the ethos of sensibility.

Morton's epic tale of the noble savage, *Ouâbi*, as well as her long anti-slavery

poem from 1792, *Tears of Humanity*, each an embodiment of the spirit of sensibility, ranks among her stronger works. Her celebrated *Ouâbi* was perhaps Morton's most resounding success. The Indian tale was extravagantly reviewed, making her famous throughout America and in London, where it was republished and adapted for the stage. Morton took slavery as her theme in her poem *The African Chief*. Written in response to a ruling by the British Parliament, the work was more popularly known by the name *Tears of Humanity*. Through her verse, Morton voiced her disappointment with that "hard race of pallid hue" upon their failure to enact a bill that would have abolished the slave trade throughout the Empire. In this instance, her "feeling heart" lay not with the British, whom she described as "unpracticed in the power to feel," but with the suffering of the "princely slave" with whom she identified in verse. Though today Morton is often referred to as an early abolitionist, the designation is a bit of an overstatement. With this poem and others, she does adamantly condemn slavery; however, her motivation likely stemmed as much from her sentimental posture as from anti-racism.

A large number of Morton's essays addressed sentimental themes such as empathy and the senses, the animal *passions* and *tempers*, art and artifice, and the origin of true knowledge. For example, in her piece "On Physiognomy," Morton explored the theories of famed phrenologist Johann Caspar Lavater, ultimately finding both the prose and the premise of head-reading absurd and "irritating." Her essay "On the union of opposing propensities" delves into the contemporary preoccupation with the nature of human passion



and the importance of maintaining emotional balance. Morton's treatment of these matters was exceedingly well reasoned and informed by the writings of contemporary intellectual heavy-weights, including Rousseau, Locke, and Hume, among many others. Her arguments were supported by fastidious research as evidenced by quotations and original analyses offering further proof of her fitness to travel amidst the masculine world of ideas.

### **Sheltered Women and Sensible Readers: Sympathy and American Character**

During this progressive historical moment, many Americans engaged with the philosophical movement of sensibility in their daily lives, perhaps most obviously through consuming sentimental fiction. Republican readership was not only large and growing, but it also had a multifaceted complexion. Sensibility was never the sole province of abstract theorists. Markman Ellis elucidates the populism of the era in *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel*. Ellis's engaging book treats sentimental fiction more seriously as a genre than most analyses of the form, arguing that sentimental fiction consciously participated in the most widely debated public concerns of the late eighteenth century. More recently, in 2002, Andrew Burstein applied the same approach to the political character of sympathy, suggesting that the language of sympathy and sentiment held an "irresistible appeal to the founders while conveying republican thought beyond elite culture."

Contrary to the perception of sentimental fiction as "women's fiction," such tales were addressed as much to men as to women and increasingly to those Americans who

inhabited the middling strata of society. For them, sentimental novels were one of a “variety of entertainment alongside diversions such as pleasure gardens, plays, and periodicals.” However, audiences of all sorts began to approach the act of novel-reading as an amusement, perhaps even a titillating one, rather than for its morally edifying potential. This new posture inspired concern among many individuals who viewed the practice as folly and expected more self-control from citizens of a republic of virtue. Denial of pleasure, not its gratification, was required; fanciful diversions were simply not beneficial for the public good. The eroticization of female characters in novels, and, in a whole assortment of other popular cultural products—the woodcuts that illustrated such fiction, female portraiture, even sermons—tended to cast women, in the words of early British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, as merely “creatures of sensation.” Such presentations contributed extensively to the already perception of the flimsiness of feminine reason.

Rowson, the first bestselling author of American sentimental fiction, grasped this reality almost immediately. Motivated by her concerns about the lack of actual exposure for many women to educational resources and real-world events, Rowson founded an academy for girls in Boston where she instituted a historically based curriculum. She explained her appreciation of the discipline in a commencement address, asserting that the “study of history leads us from ourselves and the objects immediately surrounding us.”

Acknowledging the fact that accessibility to serious studies was significantly more restricted for women than it was for the men of their generation, Rowson and other early

female educators promoted the merit of history as a corrective form of reading.

Republican educators across the country recognized the emancipatory possibilities arising from literacy and from learning in general. Among female leaders in the pedagogical field, the realization of the transformational potential of academic studies was especially promising. Rowson said as much in the graduation speech addressed to her all-female student population. For the relatively secluded young women who were her sole audience, Rowson went on to suggest that history is the “common school of all mankind . . . a school of morality, it entertains and instructs, forms the heart and understanding, enriches the memory, [and] excites a proper curiosity,” as it “inspires a love of literature.” Last, the lessons of history “improve the taste.”

Anita Baym astutely observes the tenor of Rowson’s lack of concern with the historical edification of American men, pointing out that she does not “need to say what other writers on the subject made clear—that studying history produces even greater benefits for women than men.” Rowson had not exactly acquiesced to those who ascribed to the overstimulative theory of the effects of novel-reading. Rather, it appears that she came to the realization that the universe of allowed ideas available to many middle- and upper-class young women was simply too limited. Forced by the dictates of propriety to remain primarily in the home, discouraged from worldly pursuits and avenues to real-life experiences, such quite literally sheltered young women had little chance of maturing into actualized, individualized, or even rational adults. Novels of sentiment were not corruptive

but rather debilitating.

The marginalization of the genre by literary critics was not merely a result of its connotation as “women’s fiction.” A large number of these republican readers were also, as Ellis stresses, considered “amateurs” by literary historians, a factor contributing to the marginalization of the genre. For decades, the perception of a less-sophisticated audience for the sentimental novel, coupled with the form’s quixotic conventions, led to a rather dismissive appraisal of the genre, which is now garnering more serious critical attention. Vietto points out that the problematic correlation between women and fiction is exacerbated by the fact that historians “interested in the growth (or decline) of writing as a tool of civic participation” have tended to ignore women’s writings, aside from their role as novelists. Despite the longstanding association of this genre with women authors before the nineteenth century the novel represented only a fractional portion of their writings as a whole. Morton, for one, never published in that genre. The assumption that the novel was essentially a springboard by which women entered the public pool ignores the quintessential part they played in republican manuscript culture as well as the contributions of women to the civic discourse surrounding American national identity.

### **Republic of Letters or a Republic of “Scandal-Mongers”? : Crime Reportage and the “Propensity to Scandal”**

In contrast to the considerable scholarly attention now paid to sentimental fiction, cultural historians have paid less attention to the nearly contemporaneous rise of criminal

reportage as a popular genre, both as features in newspapers and as separate pamphlets or larger volumes. Every minor development—legal, criminal, or petty—in the Morton-Apthorp saga, no matter how personal, was published in excruciating detail. Trial reports and crime coverage, though only occasionally produced during the colonial period, began appearing with greater frequency in New York and Philadelphia during the 1790s and in New England by the following decade. Popular fiction writers such as William Hill Brown capitalized on real-life tragedies, incorporating thinly veiled accounts into the plots of their plays or epistolary novels. Like sentimental novels, much trial reporting of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries dealt with the interrelated themes of illicit sexuality, sexual violence, and death in its multiple manifestations.

Many people, including local editors and writers, were positively fascinated by sensationalized stories of seduction, suicide, rape, dueling, and infanticide. Newspapers from the period even printed letters to the editor expressing disappointment when a scandalous tale did not meet all of its shocking expectations. Crime reportage—a natural extension of the accelerating print culture—initiated yet another mechanism by which the press could intervene in the lives of regular citizens. Throughout the seventeenth century, court records represented the sole source of data about criminal behavior in the colonies, and, according to Friedman’s comprehensive history of crime in America, a “frank and robust sexuality leaps from the pages of the record books,” identifying “fornication and other offenses against morality” as by far the best-documented crimes. So, it seems, the

colonial keepers of records found scurrilous offenses more compelling than those of a mundane nature, a tendency soon mirrored in the general press. By the end of the eighteenth century, scandal of a sexual nature—in truth and in fiction—was among the most popular subjects addressed by participants in all areas of the public sphere.

Often gruesome descriptions of duels were regular features in local newspapers as well. And though Perez Morton and Charles Apthorp never actually took their paces, the fictionalized account of their aborted duel is indicative of a mounting appetite for sensationalism. One of the principal characters in the parody *Occurrences of the Times* went by the name “Peep”—a nosy individual who is regularly apprehended climbing upon barrels to peer into the windows of his neighbors. Having uncovered a bit of gossip via a mysterious missive, the town busybody could not wait to disclose its purloined contents. For Peep, who confessed an inability to “conquer [his] propensity to scandal,” the discovery was a “capital opportunity . . . to gratify the idly curious—to spread dissention and discord—draw a tear from the eye of sensibility—or raise a blush of indignation on the cheek of can dour.” The fictional scandalmonger, however, was far from alone in this propensity.

Peep’s appetite for scandal resonated with Boston readers, who seemed to believe that the public’s right to know (a modern construct that finds its roots in the early republic) superseded an individual’s right to privacy. A reviewer for the *Massachusetts Centinel*, writing pseudonymously as “Civil Spy,” quipped that “in a town so young as Boston and

so small . . . the most trivial circumstances will circulate through it in half an hour.”

Whether a matter was trivial or not, the late-eighteenth-century republican readership felt a sense of entitlement when it came to all sorts of information, no matter how personal.

Fueled by the escalating consumerism of their capitalist economy and a communal delight in the free and abundant press as well as by a democratic rhetoric that leveled social barriers, America’s idealized republic of letters was in many ways transformed into a republic of scandal-mongers. By the close of the eighteenth century, men and women from many stations in life were reading and writing on a regular basis. And for the eighteenth-century woman, whose virtue was a principal subject of this chatter, keeping up appearances was imperative. However, the wise female reader learned not to make a grand production of her literary leanings.

The following chapter investigates the many mixed messages encountered by American women at the close of the eighteenth century as well as the broad array of authorial positions available to them in the public world of ideas. As an early American intellectual, Morton developed a sophisticated strategy for negotiating the oftentimes treacherous terrain of public opinion. As a female intellectual, she first had to contend with the ongoing debates regarding the appropriate cultural functions of a republican wife and mother. Unlike her male contemporaries, for whom the term “man of ideas” has never been an historically necessary typology, Morton, as a woman-on-display, faced the added hurdle of lingering questions surrounding both her moral character and the intellectual capacity of

women as a whole. By leveraging her many strategic alliances and through the selective deployment of her rather ambivalent name recognition, Morton reconstructed her public image as she reinvented herself as a woman of ideas—her unique brand of public relations, however, did not meet with approval in all quarters.



## Chapter Three

### Women in the Republican Eye: Sarah Morton and Boston's Public Sphere

Pardon me, my female readers, when I remind you of the pernicious consequences of that dangerous custom, of spending whole afternoons in company without any work, which is either amusing or profitable—where the fluttering of the fan, the whispering of some nonsensical idle fop, or the practicing of the coquettish and prudish airs is substituted for that diligence, ingenuity and industry, which enlivens conversation and enhances sociability.

— John Cosens Ogden, 1793

John Cosens Ogden (1755-1800) presided over a large congregation at St. John's Church at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where he rarely missed an opportunity to sermonize on behavior befitting women in the new nation. The influential rector, who published many of his fiery diatribes in newspapers across the republic, was especially interested in the future of religious education for women. In his moralizing treatise *The Female Guide: or, thoughts on the education of that sex accommodated to the state of society, manners and government, in the United States*, Ogden expounded upon his expectations for suitable wives and mothers in eighteenth-century America, addressing everything from manners to mode of dress. In addition to the usual line-up of virtues such as duty, temperance, industry, frugality, and the all-important chastity, Ogden voiced his alarm about the increase in high living in America, particularly the effect that such excess would have on susceptible young women.

Many of Ogden's contemporaries agreed. Maintaining one's reputation in polite society was problematic for many American citizens. However, an irreproachable image

was imperative for republican women, who became the pet subject for preachers, pamphleteers, and novelists throughout the country. The matter of female vanity, considered modesty's opposite, was a priority in most late-eighteenth-century discourses on manners—an era marked by its proclivity for polarities. This highly charged matter inspired social commentators of every stripe and led to a veritable cottage industry founded upon the notion of moral reform. The result was the publication of scores of courtesy books, conduct guides for girls, cautionary tales of seduction and innocence lost, and rousing sermons printed in local newspapers. This confluence of concerns and formats fixated popular attention on the public and private behavior of women in a modern republic.

Ogden and fellow crusaders such as educator and physician Benjamin Rush (1745-1813) were zealous. Nina Baym points to Rush's 1787 essay, "Thoughts Upon the Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government in the United States of America," as the earliest example of the anti-novel jeremiad; however, hundreds of similar condemnations appeared in writings from the early national period. Eighteenth-century women penned these instructive tracts as well, among them British writer Maria Edgeworth, a personal favorite of Morton, who commended her work for its "instructing and delighting" properties. Rowson, too, ultimately turned her pen to the education of young women. However, her formula for improvement was based upon the study of classical history rather than the studied artifice displayed by the heroines of her fiction.

For Morton's affinity for Rowson as well as educator and writer Edgeworth, see her essay "Rights and Wrongs." Ostensibly a piece on *right* and *wrong* attributes for polite women, it applauded the *right* work of Edgeworth, a contemporary British woman of ideas, while contrasting her style with the clearly *wrong* Mary Wollstonecraft. Morton's piece rapidly morphed into an assault directed against the unorthodox ideas of the latter. The more provincial American's scorn for the moral shortcomings of the radical British proto-feminist received energetic treatment. Morton was appalled by Wollstonecraft's highly publicized romantic and sexual extremes, and though Morton had also experienced public vilification, she expressed no sympathy for Wollstonecraft's plight. Morton's essay illustrates well the tension even among women thinkers regarding tolerable standards of female behavior. However, the inflammatory and moralizing chords routinely struck by such guides for girls are noticeably silent in the more tempered writings of both Edgeworth and Rowson.

More commonly, late-eighteenth-century devotees of decorum enthusiastically opined on the dangers of seduction, inducement, and imperiled virtue in order to stem what they saw as the rising tide of vice. The alarming escalation in novel-reading among the nation's young women factored largely in the equation, and fiction soon merged with fact in the popular imagination. Some of the most vociferous rants to appear in print were predicated upon a widespread fear of the corruptive potential of novel-reading on America's purportedly pliable women readers.

These formulaic tracts admonished impressionable female readers of their personal and patriotic duty to stay vigilant at all times. The sanctity of individual maidenhood—and the national republic—demanded it. In the unlikely event that American citizens had momentarily forgotten their communal obligation to safeguard feminine honor, Ogden's pedantic *Female Guide* and other such texts aimed to “refresh the memory and keep alive the subject” while warning the chaste to steer clear of “men of libertine principles.” Evidently, scoundrels like Perez Morton were roaming about the countryside in large numbers, just waiting to seize an opportunity to “impose their vices and infirmities upon the purest and most angelic part of the female sex!” This by-then familiar trope was reinforced through the conventions of the controversial European transplant, sentimental fiction.

Without the advent of the wildly popular novels of sentiment, many clerics, critics, and other promoters of propriety would have been robbed of their most fertile material. And oftentimes the most vocal votaries of moral rectitude took delight in the dirtiest of details. The familiarity with which the virtuous spoke of a whole assortment of vices and, even more, the relish with which these paragons recited their illicit inventory were breathtaking. By the latter decades of the eighteenth century, moralists had a greater number of platforms, and larger audiences, than at any time before—through which to prognosticate on the perils of uncapped female passion.

The constant drumbeat sounding the hazards of fiction seems more than merely a rhetorical strategy. The frequency with which the seduction motif appeared in the letters

and print culture of the times suggests a more prurient possibility. Perhaps the pleasure in the reportage itself induced a vicarious thrill for the pious or even for delicate female readers. Cathy Davidson has argued that early sentimental novels were a subversive genre that empowered women and young people in a still-patriarchal and age-stratified society. However, I feel that the erotic potential of reading itself warrants further research. After all, while reading, women were either alone with their imaginations or performing in front of an audience. Both scenarios presented threats to those Americans who were alarmed about the plight of seemingly impressionable young women.

When Ogden wrote about then-fashionable flirtatious practices—affectations derived in large part from the antics of sentimental fiction’s unchaste heroines—his injunctions were ardent. Pointing to “dangerous custom[s]” such as the “flattering of the fan” and the “practicing of the coquettish,” Ogden pronounced his worst fears. What, he speculated, could be more deleterious than temptations facing unsuspecting women who were “idly sauntering abroad, or night-walking, while [the] servants are rioting at home”? For a man of the cloth, the pastor was well versed in idle amusements. The public performance of sensual sermons may have served a vicarious, even voyeuristic purpose for the many (generally male) orators who lingered at length on dangers lurking in every darkened doorway. Ogden’s impassioned litany of vices, when spoken, can be interpreted as a sort of oral stand-in for the forbidden behavior itself and, when featured in newspapers, a body double in print. Preached from the pulpit and in the public sphere,

these energetic soliloquies were in many instances seductive themselves, if in a disquieting way.

Popular literature of all sorts glorified women who mounted a valiant defense against sexual advances; in practice, a virtuous woman was required to protect her honor above all else. And in most states the law stipulated that a woman put up a real fight against a sexual aggressor—failure to do so could be interpreted as a kind of tacit consent. Until well into the nineteenth century, consent was considered a valid defense against rape charges, and men were frequently cleared as a result. In a climate in which a female victim's inability to ward off her male aggressor served to justify the crime itself, the loss of feminine virtue took on apocalyptic dimensions for society at large. Feminine virtue, as a republican construct, functioned in a metonymic manner—as women went, so went society. Without the preservation of the honor and virtue of the female citizenry, social order throughout the nation could crumble. As women fell, so fell the republic.

### **The Perils of Overexposure: High-Profile Women and *Natural* Feminine Modesty**

Cultural contestation of all sorts was highly sexualized throughout eighteenth-century European and American societies—between the various races and social classes, and among generations. A discernible tension was perhaps most overt between and among women and men. In the fragile American context, the heated public discourse and palpable anxiety surrounding gender relations often assumed global implications. The comparatively blank cultural slate of the New World presented the founders with an unprecedented

opportunity to fashion an archetypal national identity, an ideal befitting male and female citizens of the world's first modern republic. Everyone wanted to get it right.

So during the years of the republican experiment, public and private codes of behavior were strictly mandated, particularly for those who inhabited polite society. The discursive practices of politics, the pulpit, politeness, pedagogy, sensibility, and jurisprudence coalesced into the companion ideologies of civic virtue and domesticity—a formidable force. Early political and religious leaders established elaborate codes of behavior that were different for men and for women, and for inside and outside the home. Often subtly negotiated, even blatantly transgressed, these strictures left many among the citizenry perplexed. For the benefit of bewildered female readers, how-to manuals such as Ogden's clearly articulated community standards, as the publications reinforced their own well-defined boundaries and contributed to the ongoing conversation concerning American identity. Ogden's *Female Guide* is representative of contemporary rhetoric regarding desirable, or permissible, attributes for aspiring wives and mothers in the new nation.

Conveniently for his audience, the pastor included—in minute detail—less-pleasing traits as well, enumerating those characteristics that, if encouraged, would inevitably result in a mob of disagreeable companions, unfit wives, and second-rate republican women. For example, readers of the *Guide* were apprised of advisable facial configurations: the perfect

mouths (and eyes, for that matter) were those that remained closed. The exemplary wife was meek, embracing a “silent tongue,” a “downcast eye and prudent retreat.” Modesty, considered natural in women, ranked high on the list of commendable feminine qualities—as opposed to vanity, deemed unnatural in women, which fell among the most despicable. Accordingly, the eighteenth-century female from polite society dared not look a man in the eye, much less direct a prolonged searching look, without the risk of impropriety.

Since male citizens, though possessed naturally of the power of reason, nevertheless had difficulty reining in their animal passions, women of the republic were responsible for ensuring the cohesion of the national moral fabric. Feminine modesty served as a check to balance the inability among otherwise reasonable men to curb their carnal urges. More than simply attracting a worthy spouse and giving birth to the next generation of Americans, the writers of these didactic tracts hoped that republican wives and mothers would engender virtuosity and sensibility in male family members. Mary D. Sheriff’s neat analysis of Rousseau’s theory of gender deconstructs, among other things, the philosopher’s rhetorical finesse regarding the concept of feminine modesty, exploring the manner in which he took modesty—a “concept useful for subjugating women”—and made it attractive. Or as Sheriff phrases this dichotomy, after defining women as “bereft of natural power” and having “stripped them of their will,” the renowned *philosophe* “compensate[d] them with modesty.” She continues, explaining that for many eighteenth-century thinkers—since women lacked both intrinsic rationality and self-control—their



innate consolation prize, modesty, further served as their “willpower and armament in the war between the sexes.”

Sheriff’s study specifically addresses eighteenth-century Europe, but the ideological foundations bear equally upon the American colonial and republican scene, though oftentimes generating unanticipated outcomes. The rather casual oversight of the British government during the pre-revolutionary era had presented colonial women opportunities, however limited, for greater social latitude and experimentation than that afforded their English counterparts. The growth of domesticity in the republic was buttressed by the European ethos of sensibility but took on a different character under the guise of the American democracy-in-progress. A primary tenet of sensibility was the improvement of the treatment of women by their male companions. Given the dynamic and transparent nature of republican society, a disparity between the rhetoric and the reality of male/female relations was likely more pronounced than in the long-established, tradition-bound countries its inhabitants had left behind. Trial-and-error, as much as protocol, contributed to the supple nature of interpersonal affairs throughout the young nation, particularly in relations between and among the sexes.

### **“Home is the Mother’s Province”: Morton’s Self-Determination and the Rhetoric of American Domesticity**

When applied to America’s fluid social environment, the rhetoric of domesticity, with its codified and gendered stereotypes, could assume heterogeneous and unforeseen

forms. During the years surrounding the Revolution, elite women in metropolitan centers such as Boston or Philadelphia had become accustomed to having the eyes of the public fixed upon them. Some seemed to enjoy the limelight, and more than a few were beginning to experiment with creative self-fashioning—often at their own peril. Contradictory expressions of female behavior—on the part of Morton and other writers of both sexes—mirrored the gendered confusion apparent in republican town squares. When the subject of modesty among women was bandied about in the public sphere, the responses were often vehement. Vanity among women, whether expressed in the form of flamboyance in dress or decorum or in the shape of published political prose, was not easily countenanced. Social commentators routinely couched any sort of female attention-grabbing gesture in terms that emphasized such efforts as unfeminine and unnatural.

Courtesy of the increasingly pervasive, and invasive, press, society's leading ladies were routinely subjected to scrutiny by a widespread audience. In such a climate, projecting an image that conveyed virtuous republican ideals was crucial. Prominent female personalities like Morton who possessed a bit of ingenuity increasingly found room for expressive self-constitution, within limits. However, the exercise of creative self-determination among women of the republican era was possible only after the completion of their principal duties as patriotic wives and mothers. Managing a household was a time-consuming occupation, so spare time for self-improvement was a luxury afforded only to women in society's top tiers. Women writers were required by convention to explain

themselves, generally in the form of a literary apology, and especially for longer works. For instance, in Morton's preface to her 1797 epic, *Beacon Hill: A Local Poem, Historic and Descriptive*, the author's conventional defense of her literary aspirations in part reads: "it is only amid the leisure and retirement, to which the sultry season is devoted that I permit myself to hold converse with the Muses." In Morton's case, this apology was a bit disingenuous; nevertheless, the shrewd writer wrote what she felt was expected of her in the eyes of the reading public. Morton was mindful of her primary cultural role as virtuous wife and mother, the "one personal occupation, which my station renders obligatory."

As a general rule, the women of the republic were charged with both exemplifying and reaffirming civic virtue for the entire population. Further, they were to achieve this weighty public goal solely through their circumscribed influence in the private domestic sphere. Among American middle-class women, the prudent acquisition of agreeable endowments just made good sense. Reverend Ogden rosily painted the rewards of appropriate female conduct, declaring that "home is the mother's province," where "she reigns the sole mistress the greatest part of her life." For many would-be republican mothers, the promise of sovereignty over one's own, if solely domestic, province would have been enticing, although it came at a price. In addition to the vicissitudes of wedded life, married women whose dominion was decidedly private bore the responsibility of upholding the entire family's appearance of public virtue—a prospect that for Morton must have seemed untenable. Her culture had prescribed a model of feminine virtue that was

coded as private, domestic, and out of the public eye. For the high-visibility Morton, the entire notion of public virtue must have seemed a cruel contradiction in terms.

Women in the public eye, such as Morton, who openly expressed opinions on matters unrelated to the hearth and home, were roundly viewed to be improper, immodest. The rapidly proliferating printed materials of the era further reified modesty as the preeminent feminine virtue. At the same time, republican readers of all manner of texts were indoctrinated with ambivalent, often contradictory, examples of the rewards and pleasures of both chastity and motherhood, the dual birthrights of the virtuous woman. Morton's writings embodied the ambiguity of the moment, as they routinely exposed her own uncertainty regarding appropriate female conduct.

In her essay "The Sexes," Morton surveyed with cynicism the paucity of worthwhile public vocations available to women of her generation, arriving at the conclusion that men were "sent into this breathing world for the purpose of enjoyment." Women, by contrast, were doomed to lives of "trial and suffering." Next Morton catalogued the variety of liberties afforded republican men, noting that "to man belong professions, dignities, authorities, and pleasures." But for women, who were again shortchanged, there remained only "duties, domestic virtues, and perhaps, as the result of these," the happiness of "tranquil submission." Morton's tone here was blithely sardonic regarding the restrictions placed upon her solely because of her sex. For her, this inequity was especially disconcerting, because her real-world experience and that of many women

were distinguished more by “trial and suffering” than by pleasures of any sort. The hypocrisy of an era whose rhetoric optimistically promoted individual freedoms and liberty for all of its citizenry was rarely lost on Morton. One never knows whether irony, or even sarcasm, lurks beneath the surface of her extensive writings.

In a later passage from the same essay, though, Morton appeared to acquiesce to the views of Rousseau and company, seemingly contradicting her earlier remarks. By readily acknowledging the necessity for women to submit to “the dictatorship of men,” Morton revealed her ambiguous position on women’s roles. When writing about the expectations for republican wives and mothers, she appeared at times to support a more deferent posture. While one cannot ignore how she echoed the passive sentiment in verse, Morton’s rather blasé tone in “The Sexes” suggests the possibility that she was disingenuous rather than resigned. According to her “Stanzas to a recently reunited husband,” Morton had evidently submitted. In this poem, her words betrayed her sense of resignation with her lot in life. Morton’s lyrical explanation for choosing a posture of wifely constancy indicated that she had simply given up any hope of marital satisfaction: “Since, subject to its ardent sway/  
How many hearts were left to weep/To find the granted wish decay/and the triumphant passion sleep.”

Inconsistencies such as these on the subject of gender roles remained a persistent theme throughout Morton’s writings—an ambivalence toward gender roles that was commonplace in the work of many women writers during the late eighteenth century in

America and abroad. For example, *My Mind and its Thoughts* contained a vituperative essay, “Rights and Wrongs,” in which she parsed the seminal work of early feminist and intellectual Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). Though Wollstonecraft also wrote novels, history, even a children’s book, her essay, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, from 1792, is the work most widely associated with the scandalous British woman of ideas. Considered one of the cornerstones of feminist philosophy, this work made the then-provocative contention that women are rational beings possessed of an equal, if usually uncultivated, capacity for reason and therefore deserving of the same rights as men.

As was the case with many eighteenth-century women of the mind, the colorful personal affairs of Wollstonecraft drew as much notice as her substantial literary offerings. Unconventional from birth, Wollstonecraft embraced a liberal lifestyle highlighted by a failed suicide attempt and tumultuous, well publicized romantic entanglements. She was married to the radical philosopher William Godwin and linked with highly visible male figures, including the married painter Henry Fuseli (1741-1825). Though he rarely painted from life Fuseli made an exception when he took Wollstonecraft’s portrait. However, he is remembered more for his writings on art, ranking him among the most influential figures of British art criticism of the period. Wollstonecraft is said to have aggressively pursued Fuseli, even suggesting a platonic living arrangement with Fuseli and his wife, who was neither amused nor amenable. Like Morton, Wollstonecraft, if in her case perhaps more deservedly, was constantly the object of gossip, and she faced rampant public criticism for

her then-outlandish lifestyle.

Morton was appalled by the personal life of her fellow woman writer. Far from sympathizing with Wollstonecraft's plight in the face of public humiliation, the more provincial Morton vehemently denounced the Briton for dragging women into the public debate surrounding individual rights. As Morton saw matters, Wollstonecraft—whom the American described as “affecting to appear a hotheaded [R]epublican” and guilty of both “mental extravagance” and a “restless and unsubdued spirit”—was responsible for restricting more female intellectual liberty than the “whole host of masculine revilers.” By boldly proclaiming “the rights of woman,” the conspicuous Wollstonecraft, whose behavior, Morton felt, would have “disgraced the profession of a pagan,” called far too much attention to herself. In addition to Wollstonecraft's moral failings, Morton declared Wollstonecraft's writings rife with “pernicious precepts, and still more pernicious practice.” From Morton's practical, if hypocritical, point of view, controversial women like Wollstonecraft simply made other smart women look bad. Reputations such as hers did little to advance the feminine cause. From a public relations perspective, Wollstonecraft was all wrong. Morton preferred that Wollstonecraft remain “the *landmark* and not the *model* of her kind.” Hers was an association Morton could do without.

Morton was among those public figures who weighed in on the issue of flamboyance, and she appeared, at times, to toe the party line, writing that excessive vanity—on the part of men or women—led to “self-complacency.” Further, she contended that

“putting on the borrowed garb of good nature” was a transparent maneuver by those “solicitous for popular applause.” The fact that she sought “popular applause” herself apparently did not problematize the issue for Morton. She wrote that, for her, humility served as the “guide and guardian of every virtue,” but one questions her sincerity on this point. Humility was never Morton’s strong suit. Nor was the enigmatic author acclaimed for her embodiment of contemporary feminine virtues such as industry, duty, and chastity.

If others misattributed vainglorious motivations to her literary ambitions, Morton assuaged her conscience with her own oftentimes malleable code of moral rectitude. So long as one knew oneself, and Morton believed she did, public misapprehensions were of no consequence. Her thoughts in the poem “Self-Knowledge” are compelling when read in the context of her development as a woman of ideas: “There exists in every thinking mind, a certain conscious *knowledge of itself*, which, under any possible occurrence, constitutes either its punishment, or its consolation.” Morton had no doubt that women and “every thinking mind” were capable of the same reason as the male republican citizenry. However, the conspicuous reappearance in her writings of themes such as envy, injustice, enemies, and defamation belies her lyric bravado regarding individual worth as the concept relates to self-knowledge. For one who so clearly desired hers to be a life of the mind, Morton may never have truly known her own. In the end, she was left disillusioned. For a time, however, she flourished in an intellectual universe of her own making.

Many thinkers and critics of the era blamed such female dissatisfaction on too much



education, on the grounds that it distracted women from their duties. Ogden cautioned, “learned women are valuable, but give me leave to observe, that industrious women generally make the best wives.” On that point, the provincial pastor had the backing of the era’s brightest philosophers. In the minds of many, intellectual leanings in women tended to make them not only unfeminine and undesirable but also poor republican role models and selfish or vain wives and mothers. John Trumbull, the cousin of the artist, satirized this prevailing worldview when he queried in rhyme: “And why should girls be *learned* or wise,/Books only serve to spoil their eyes./The studious eye but faintly twinkles/And reading paves the way to wrinkles.” This emerging opinion lent further credence to the necessity of imposing the dictates of domesticity.

It is important, however, to keep in mind that though the separate-spheres ideology commanded a good amount of influence on American popular opinion, the ideal was never a mirror image reflecting the practicalities of everyday life but always a shifting and contested verbal construction. When late-eighteenth-century American women ventured out into the public, exclusively masculine arena of world affairs and intellectual inquiry, they learned to do so with finesse. Paradoxically, the rhetorical confines of domesticity afforded considerable space for experimentation and self-determination—space that Morton readily inhabited. For those women who were similarly inclined, the domestic arena allowed for the private pursuit of serious studies. The few models of acceptable feminine public display were at once limiting and potentially liberating. Salon society, in Europe as

well as in America, was dominated by women—the informality and spontaneity of this platform allowed female intellectuals to reign as “sole mistresses” over their own empire of ideas. Republican salon culture, explored more fully in a later section, presented the unique possibility of emancipating the women of ideas from the ideological, if not always the material, bounds of the domestic realm.

### **“Unmeaning Applause” and “Tickling the Idle Ear”: The Interior Designs of the Accomplished Woman**

More typically, however, the private-sphere construct served as a mechanism by which many women, particularly those from the upper echelons of society in Europe and increasingly in the nascent republic, were relegated to an isolated, insular universe permitting them limited real-world experience. Unmarried women in polite society, for whom the prospect of domestic empire no doubt had its allure, faced challenges peculiar to their unattached status. In the years following independence, the common perception of the corruptibility of the chaste, coupled with the temptations regularly seen as associated with city life, led, in Ann Bermingham’s estimation, to a “growing taste for private rather than public entertainment.” This impression of the venality of urban environments meant that unmarried women were increasingly associated with and intended to be seen in their domestic surroundings. The otherwise restrictive construction provided ample free time and access to an abundance of written and printed reading materials, both essential ingredients supporting the attainment of refined, if sometimes hollow, accomplishments.

Like their fictional doubles in sentimental novels, eighteenth-century women in the main had few opportunities to strike a progressive posture or to develop a sense of individualized depth of character. Consequently, the gendered contrivance—the “woman of accomplishments” model of femininity—emerged around the end of the eighteenth century as a permissible way for women to occupy the public eye.

The one-dimensional archetype of the accomplished woman found reinforcement from similarly shallow female characterizations advanced through the pulpit, on the pages of popular print material, and also in more highbrow contemporary philosophical constructions of gender. As a consequence, popular perceptions of the ideal eighteenth-century woman projected a sort of female shadow image: women, while desirable on the surface, were capable of nothing more than superficial accomplishments—the only “improvement they [we]re excited, by their station in society, to acquire.” At least that is the manner in which women figures typically appeared in popular literature as well as the portraiture of the period—a genre that was, over the course of the century, increasingly associated with the perceived vanity of the female subject.

Although modesty dictated that virtuous women not be seen in public, respectable women were the recipients of male attention in sanctioned settings. Tea parties, picnics, and luncheons presented exceptional, if staged, occasions for refined women to be seen in public without incurring social disapprobation. Refined attainments acquired through fashionable educations, such as drawing, mastery of a foreign language, or proficiency on

the harpsichord, provided an excuse for women who were generally, but not exclusively, single and of marrying age to showcase themselves and their attendant, though perhaps not always resplendent, “talents” before a strategic assemblage of individuals. Like contemporary male political figures, women from polite society orchestrated events that were designed exclusively for invited guests and performed in the private realm of the home.

Such semipublic festivities were mounted to accentuate feminine endowments in the best possible light and in picturesque settings. This was especially the case for eligible young women for whom the feminized spectacles of domestic “pseudo-events” highlighted the lovely subjects in their own homes, preferably adorned by the flattering attributes of femininity. Further, women could display their cultivated talents as they safely experimented with being the object of the male gaze. Tea-table intrigue and other interior amusements maximized the impact of such attainments for unmarried women, for whom polished refinements were not only desirable but prerequisites for entrance into polite society. Once a woman married, however, her engaging acquisitions, so seductive during courtship, often became liabilities in the proper wife.

For his part, a man in attendance at such manufactured displays of femininity, dubbed by Anne Bermingham the “gentleman connoisseur,” could freely gaze upon the entertainment and, more important, the elegant entertainer without impropriety as she struck an alluring pose at the piano or daintily recited a favorite lyrical poem—never mind if her

notes or intonation left listeners wanting. Those in attendance could look while feigning to listen, all the while reinforcing the object status of the woman on display. The entire exhibition, the product of domestic machinations, was an implicitly acknowledged performance conducted under the facade of moral edification.

Most eighteenth-century European and American thinkers had little difficulty reconciling the “object” role of women with the requirement that they remain in the private sphere, though occasional exhibitions of the fruits of a fashionable education were promoted. Depictions of women that accentuated superficiality as a natural characteristic were further bolstered by the writings of European intellectuals and critics of the era—works that were widely available and eagerly read throughout the American republic. Simply put, men looked; women were looked at. As a result, the accomplished woman, like the woman of ideas, was a highly ambiguous figure in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture, for “she not only continued to problematize ideas of individuality and subjectivity” but did so within the confines of domesticity—that is, within the “space reserved for the exercise of privacy and individual authenticity.”

Parading, vanity, and self-promotion were undesirable, though not uncommon, traits in any upstanding republican. When engaged in by women, these performative practices prompted ample and ambiguous responses from the press. A 1790 editorial about the accomplished woman queried, “[h]as she no more important duties to discharge than to tickle the idle ear, and to excite the unmeaning applause? Does she reflect that she was not

made to shine in any artificial accomplishment, but to qualify herself to be a wife, a mother, an agreeable companion?" The question reveals the tense and contradictory nature of debates surrounding eighteenth-century notions of both appropriate female behavior and character and serves as further evidence of the prevalence of that pressing matter in print culture. Women of ideas throughout the West have struggled to reverse this negative stereotype ever since.

### **Women in Print: American Identity and Feminizing the Public Sphere**

The relationships of women to literacy, publishing, and authorship were unprecedented during the republican years, particularly to Americans of Morton's generation. Earlier fears of censorship from colonial authorities that may once have discouraged writers—both male and female—were no longer relevant. As beneficiaries of sacrifices by those who came before them, post-revolutionary intellectuals and everyday people alike were free to imagine what it really meant to be an American. And as families slowly began to wield less influence over the lives of their children, many began to look to their peers as exemplars rather than to look backward to the standards of their parents' generation. First-generation Republicans had the luxury of exploring the identity of the new nation as well as their individual character. Because they were never forced to revoke traditional loyalties, their unique situation fomented the development of modern subjectivity, selfhood, and the cultivation of individuality. Men, and more than a few women, seized the propitious occasion.

For American women, as with other social groups, independence from Britain and the birth of the republic marked a dramatic historical moment, presenting opportunities, however limited, for greater social latitude and experimentation than that afforded their European counterparts. Despite an Old World residue casting a film over the manners of polite society and the theoretical barriers that discouraged public-ness as unfeminine, many American women had grown used to a certain degree of personal independence during the time leading up to the republican era. In addition, and contrary to much of the exclusionary rhetoric of Enlightenment philosophers, the economic and commercial implications wrought by the American Revolution created unprecedented opportunities for women to enter the public arena.

These emerging possibilities for women to weigh in on civic and political matters quickly contributed to the already considerable tension regarding the appropriate role for republican women. And as the cult of domesticity persistently reminded them, any too-public flirtations with the public sphere could be hazardous to an individual's reputation. Advocates of the domesticity doctrine met with varying degrees of success. Despite the omnipresence of the ideology's rhetoric, female participation in literary culture as well as civic discourse was hardly unheard of in the years surrounding the Revolution.

Since much revolutionary-era scholarship has focused on the challenges and largely theoretical restraints impeding American women's participation in civic and public discourse, many of the vital contributions of republican women have been overlooked. The

generally uninterrogated precept that participation in the public discourse was essential for the construction of a national identity, and for the future of the republic itself, has necessarily emphasized the accomplishments of male participants, whose comparatively glorious contributions to American military, governmental, and fundamental texts were most readily documented. Republican women may not have held public office or achieved acclaim on the battlefield, nor did they compose fundamental governmental tracts like the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence, although many were surely capable of doing so. Nonetheless, women were fluent though oftentimes muted constituents in the national conversation about the shape that such documents would eventually take.

The eighteenth-century American woman could participate in the broadening public sphere through interaction with a vast array of printed and written materials, including popular sermons and epistolary novels, and also through the consumption of the political texts of the day. Or she might indulge in those didactic conduct guides if she pleased (even if she did not entirely take their recommendations to heart). In addition as major players in the emergent manuscript culture, women during the republic could elect to write privately in journals or semiprivately through *belles lettres* that then circulated among an individual's literary coterie. Or like Morton, women could go public by submitting original poetry or prose to one of the multitude of literary journals. With so many options—and Sarah Morton experimented with them all—women began to participate in the public sphere in an unprecedented manner, in pious and political activities alike, expanding the boundaries of



acceptable behavior for all women. The thriving commercial print culture also enabled individuals of the new republic to metamorphose their private selves into public images and to make their opinions, criticisms, and original ideas widely available to a mass audience.

Though rhetorically circumscribed from participation in the male arena of public affairs, many enterprising ladies of letters found avenues through which their voices could be heard while still maintaining the appearance of propriety. The ethos of sensibility encouraged an exploration of intimacy and emotionality, and these topics factored prominently in American print and script during the latter part of the eighteenth century. Writings about relationships were regular features in books, journals, and pamphlets from the era, and female authors could usually contribute to such public discussions without attracting too much attention. One strategy employed by Morton as well as by other women writers—though some male writers did the same—was to draw on their private lives for subject matter, as opposed to selecting stereotypically masculine (and therefore potentially offensive) issues such as national politics or world affairs.

As was the case with numerous aspects of popular life, the newfound freedom from “earlier restraints on the expression of emotion opened up the possibility of crafting new cultural forms,” which elevated the discourse on intimacy as a “public good to be studied, weighed, and evaluated.” While Morton superficially chose material deemed acceptable for female writers, such as relationships and the nature of love, her work often operated subversively by addressing loftier national matters. Morton’s *Ouâbi*, for instance, can be

most literally interpreted as a female writer's musings about interpersonal emotions and romantic entanglements in general. However, the fiction also served as a public response to Morton's highly personalized, if widely broadcast, real-life domestic drama. *Ouâbi* also operated on a higher plane. Morton used the saga as the vehicle through which she voiced her opinions on the national debate surrounding constructions of American identity as well as the rights of Native Americans. And on a deeper level still, the guise of an Indian tale allowed Morton to entertain the possibility of a spiritual divorce—and divorce as a construct—from her infelicitous marriage. It is safe to assume that Morton was not alone among women writers in this sort of multilayered approach to published writings.

The nationwide hunger for new reading materials, and the relative ease of being published, generated a demand for a variety of content and made it easy enough for Morton and a large number of female authors to oblige. Scores of women had already begun to navigate the political waters through their influence in the domestic sphere and increasingly through both public and semipublic interaction with the printed, spoken, and written word. At the same time, there were multiple and still-porous points of entry—the local and national press, the pages of literary and political journals, and avid female participation in evolving manuscript culture—through which women might weigh in on civic and political matters. Such ease of transit contributed to considerable tension, “even at the highest, most self-conscious level of society . . . between the conventional view of politics as an exclusively male branch of information, and actual behavior.” However, such liberal

passage in the universe of ideas was short-lived. Once the republican gentlemen of letters sensed the full weight of feminine influence via print culture, the already considerable tension between the sexes—especially in the realm of the public—became more pronounced. The following chapter explores more fully Morton’s style of public relations, her foray into the masculine universe of ideas, and her metamorphosis into an American woman of ideas.

## Chapter Four

### Revolutionary Liaisons and Strategic Alliances: Morton's Public Relations and the Making of an American Woman of Ideas

America's booming print culture presented the possibility for widespread public dissemination of Morton's voluminous writings. A strictly private universe never sufficed for her. As a republican intellectual, Morton entertained both worldly guests and worldly concerns, cultivated reasoned and original opinions—and she assumed that her position entitled her to free commentary. The Boston native always craved recognition for her national perspectives and, above all else, for her mind. However, she was also bitterly aware that she had initially attracted notice as a result of her scandalous personal history—for her notoriety, not for her noteworthy ideas. For women, whose virtue was like a “tropical bird in a silver cage,” exposure of any sort, if not deftly handled, could be damaging. Morton's scandal-induced overexposure presented an even larger obstacle to perceived respectability.

Morton meant to achieve fame beyond infamy, so her inescapable however equivocal, public image necessitated a swift and shrewd transfiguration, plus a little help from her well-placed friends. By virtue of her blemished past as well as intellectual proclivities that she could not, or would not, suppress, the eyes of Boston *en masse* were fixed on Morton. No longer content to passively receive attention—disapproving or otherwise—of those around her, she set about the business of creating an image that she

could manage for herself. It merits noting that the determination of Morton's public relations enterprise would have been nearly impossible had she not been of a certain class. Typically, those women who failed to conform to cultural limits were excluded from polite society and considered unnaturally powerful, unfeminine, or immoral. Had Morton arisen from any other station, she would have encountered an even greater difficulty in recovering from the taint of scandal and would likely have been relegated to the position of pariah, prostitute, or maybe both.

Having successfully weathered the shocks of public humiliation and the disapprobation of many whom she considered her allies, Morton came to appreciate the importance of image management. So she drew upon her significant arsenal, natural and acquired, in an extended public relations campaign to navigate popular opinion and reinvent herself as a woman of ideas. As part of Morton's war plan, she called up her reserves: her unusually broad education as well as her native intelligence, charm, and nationalistic zeal. Social connections, Morton knew from experience, were invaluable tools for the refurbishment of her reputation as well as for the advancement of her literary career. Amiable consolation was only one of the benefits of having friends in high places. Morton, though, was intensely skeptical about the authenticity of friendship and overly cautious about enlisting assistance. "[G]enerally speaking," she wrote, "we retain the affections of our friends, just so long as we have no occasion for their actual services." However, the author soon learned with whom genuine affection resided and generously

returned the favors that such loyalty bestowed—oftentimes by commemorating meaningful (and sometimes useful) alliances in verse.

Particularly in the aftermath of the Morton-Apthorp scandal, Morton struggled to establish, conform to, and expand boundaries in her life, personally and professionally. For Morton, who found the artifice inherent in the “woman of accomplishments” persona distasteful, the model was never an option. In truth, her intellectual accomplishments as well as her marital status and age (she was thirty when the calumny unfolded) would have rendered such a posture ridiculous. Likewise, the embattled writer was forever vexed by what she saw as the public misperceptions of her character. Contemporary conduct guides may have supplied solutions for average social dilemmas but were inadequate for Morton’s individualized concerns and calamitous circumstances. Life in a community in which an individual’s worth was determined largely by the impressions of others eventually became unbearable to the author, “who dare[d] not own,/How much she feels in crowds alone.”

When in 1823 Morton brought out *My Mind and Its Thoughts*, she had already become a bit of a recluse. But in the decades bracketing the turn of the century, she strove to stand out from the crowd. Once she and her family moved from Boston to their fashionable Dorchester address at “Morton Pavilion” in 1796, Morton’s campaign to reinvent herself as a woman of ideas was in full swing. Morton was intent upon acquiring the public acclaim—not merely the personal satisfaction—that came along with her vocation as an author and position as a woman of letters. To achieve those ends, Morton

strategically deployed her influential social contacts from the worlds of print, politics, and the arts as well as her impressive paternal family connections from Braintree and Boston and her influential maternal relations from New Hampshire.

Publisher, essayist, and editor Joseph Dennie was among those strategic allies who answered Philenia's call. Dennie teamed with Morton and Stuart in a joint promotional endeavor when he planted their pair of poems in an 1803 issue of *Port Folio*. However, Morton and Dennie, seven years younger than she and also with New Hampshire roots, had been close for years. He was among her most steadfast and enthusiastic supporters. Dennie's advocacy extended to a printed (and adulatory) contribution to her lifelong pseudonymous exercise when, in 1795, he crowned her "Mrs. Montagu of America." Though the title may have flattered her intellect, the parallel with brilliant English writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) also connoted a bit of naughtiness, for that broad-minded British woman of ideas—like so many others—led a rather unconventional life. And perhaps that was Dennie's intention. However, from Morton's perspective, the comparison may not have been ideal for her planned image overhaul in provincial Boston. If she took offense, it was short-lived.

### **Strategic Alliances: Public Men and the Reinvention of Morton**

In a 1796 letter penned to Dennie, Morton invited him to visit her at Morton Pavilion. At that time the Mortons had recently moved to their new Dorchester home

designed according to her own “whimsical plan” by her cousin, Charles Bulfinch, architect of the Massachusetts State House as well as the U.S. Capitol rotunda. Just across Dudley Triangle from the fabled Swan House, Morton’s Georgian-style estate was the site from which she mounted her social and literary offensive as well as the seat of her New England salon. The whimsy of the design is revealed in the odd geometrical shapes distinguishing the residence’s individual rooms. Two square parlors flanked a large oval-shaped drawing room, described by a later visitor as topped by “vaulted ceilings” which were “elaborately decorated in stucco,” producing “one of the finest interiors to be found in this part of the country.” The opulent second-floor drawing room, according to the observer, was perfectly “fitted for hospitality,” but Morton was occasionally known to receive visitors in a more secluded venue. On the roof, the Pavilion featured an octagonal sky parlor, a sort of turret, which Morton regarded as a sanctuary to which she often retreated for artistic inspiration. By design, the lofty perch involved a bit of a trek to reach. In order to gain entry, Morton intimates first had to mount a third flight of stairs, follow a dark passage, and pass several deep recesses before reaching the door. Its elevated placement made an ideal lookout from which to spy unwelcome callers, and the extended travel time would have left plenty of time for the lady of the house—and any companion—to compose themselves before unanticipated climbers made the ascent.

One of the first guests in their new home was Dennie, who accepted Morton’s invitation to visit in August 1797. Morton’s bubbly correspondence promised a “Variety



of Prospects, enchanting and poetical—a pure Air—and a Reception of Friendship and Hospitality.” She concluded the “*Melange* which was intended for a Letter” by bidding a simple “Adieu” and signing off as “S. Morton.” As if in an afterthought, she added her husband’s greetings in a postscript, assuring Dennie that “Mr. Morton did not omit his Comments or good Wishes, tho [sic] I neglected to insert them in the proper Place—accept them now and be convinced of our Friendship.” This missive is one of Morton’s warmest surviving documents and more probably the product of true affection and shared literary affinities rather than the revelation of romantic attraction. During his stay, the self-professed “lounger” wrote in a letter to Jeremiah Mason at Portsmouth in familiar terms about Morton: “I have lounged on the sofa of Philenia and have darted Federalism at her French spouse.” Dennie’s jocular tone, a conventional polite epistolary style of the period, contradicts the apparent intimacy of the sofa scene he described. However, his reference to “her French spouse” requires little interpretation. An allusion to Perez, Dennie’s remark is intriguing considering that Morton’s spouse was mentioned only in a perfunctory P.S. to his wife’s invitation.

As early as 1790, Morton had aroused the imagination of another youthful male companion, Robert Treat Paine, Jr. (1773-1811), while he was still an undergraduate at Harvard. Poet, critic, and dramatist, Paine, who was fourteen years Morton’s junior, would eventually become a *habitué* at her Dorchester estate. Paine, for one, always recognized what he considered Morton’s munificence to the revolutionary cause, a subject

that he elaborated upon, perhaps excessively. He also proved an influential force in her public relations enterprise, as he promoted her literary reputation in every possible forum. Paine's flattery may in part explain the older author's affinity for him. In 1795, the aspiring writer mentioned Morton in his Harvard commencement poem, "The Invention of Letters," extolling her as a native-born American historian and situating her among a distinguished group of historical writers, including Jeremy Belknap, David Ramsay, George R. Minot, and Trumbull. Later, as a post-graduate, Paine read his poem "The Ruling Passion" before Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa Society, decreeing Morton the "great historian of the revolution" for her poem *Beacon Hill*. Presumably, the association would have pleased her, as it elevated her status in the public debate regarding American national identity. Fellow Boston author Mercy Otis Warren, however, who penned an encyclopedic narrative of the revolution, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*, may have taken exception to Paine's characterization. Though Warren's history was not published until 1805, her endeavor—which encompassed three volumes and 1,317 pages—was already widely known among Boston's literary circles.

Morton's undisguised friendship with Paine and an array of other "public" men raised an eyebrow or two. Though young Paine was certainly taken with her, she appeared to be in this instance no more than a mentor. Like many of Morton's associates, he shared the generally lackluster opinion of her husband. As an outspoken Federalist and editor of the semi-weekly *Federal Orrery*, Paine utilized his public platform to lampoon the showy

Democratic-Republican for his political activities, but perhaps also as a romantic rival—real or imagined. His satiric verse, “Sons of Liberty and Equality,” takes some low jabs at Mr. Morton that seem motivated by more personal aims than his partisanship for the French Revolution. Paine’s bilious reference to Perez alluded to the lawyer/Jacobin party leader’s cowardly reluctance, in September 1795, to publicly join a procession celebrating the third anniversary of the French Republic. It read, in part: “Lo, down in yon corner—*afraid to be seen*,/Perez pokes out the end of his chin—his chin;/All ready to join—*when the corner they turn*;/O Perez, thy case might a hero abash,/Thou fearest thy neighbors—thou lovest French cash.” Paine’s invective closed with a final swipe at Morton suggesting that, in whore-like fashion, Perez attended to the French “*for pay—for pay*. ” On this occasion, Sarah Morton may have taken personally the aggressive published assaults leveled at her husband, as she made no further literary contributions to the paper put out by her principal ally, Paine. For a time, the work of Morton and Dennie had regularly been featured.

Morton’s snug alliances with high-visibility male figures such as Paine, Dennie, and later Gilbert Stuart, compounded by a rather *laissez-faire* attitude when it came to relations between the sexes, may account for an apparently widely-held negative public opinion of Morton. On an extended trip to Boston, William Dunlap recorded the divergent impressions among locals of Morton’s reputation. Dunlap’s 1797 diary entry from November 25 noted, “Mrs. Morton is not much respected in private life” but also that “Mrs. Brown, my landlady says she is a very clever woman.” The derogatory

characterization of Morton may have stemmed from the unavoidable and ultimately non-strategic alliance with her own husband. Dunlap's Mrs. Brown, apparently abreast of Boston gossip, referred to the "good lady" Mrs. Morton as an "amiable, domestic Woman" who was married to "Perez Morton, a lawyer and democrat." So it is with caution that one ascribes the source of Morton's sometimes questionable public image to either her perceived social license or to the licentious conduct of Perez—an example of the elision of husband and wife, another paradox of the period.

In addition to Morton's relationships with the younger or married men in her orbit, the resourceful writer was also mindful to maintain the strategic alliances that were hers from birth. She regularly corresponded with First Lady Abigail Adams and President John Adams—her father's loyal defender from the Braintree days—dedicating verse to each of them. Morton's 1799 *Virtues of Society: A Tale Founded on Fact*, a follow-up poem to *Ouâbi: Or, the Virtues of Nature*, was inscribed to the respected Mrs. Adams. In the dedication of this tale, Morton took the opportunity to highly praise the humanity of both Adamses. Morton tended to the connection until the end, wishing immortality for Mr. Adams in her tender "Stanzas written on a social visit to the retired patriot, John Adams, late President of the United States."

In a similar manner, Morton honored the Apthorps' longtime alliance with Braintree resident James Bowdoin, whom she seemed to especially cherish. In addition to dedicating *Ouâbi*—a personal and professional triumph—to him, Morton honored Bowdoin

posthumously in verse. She expressed her eternal gratitude for his “secret bounty” in “To the Memory of the Honourable Mr. Bowdoin, late Governor and Commander in Chief of the State of Massachusetts.” Inspired by her muse, Morton wrote of the man in heavenly terms, describing Bowdoin as “one bright orb of glory” who could “scan the comet’s way” and “watch the chaste moon’s bashful ray.” Celestial metaphors aside, the poet adored the terrestrial Bowdoin for his selfless and unadvertised constancy. She remembered his “liberal praise, his cautious blame” and “charity concealed from fame.” Morton’s lyrical encomium for the patriot who put his reputation on the line on behalf of her family, if a bit overblown, was nonetheless heartfelt. For their part, Bowdoin and Adams each continued to encourage Morton’s literary endeavors, as evidenced by the prominent positioning of their names atop each of her lists of paying subscribers. To Morton’s disappointment, her oeuvre was not aligned for posterity with her nationally revered supporters.

### **A Triangular Affair: The Morton, Dunn, and Stuart Connection**

In her lifetime, Morton seemed unaware that her conduct might be misconstrued, but she persisted in cultivating less strategic, though doubtless privately fulfilling, public alliances. For example, this American woman of ideas embarked upon an intriguing association with Counselor John Dunn, a member of the Irish Parliament from 1790 to 1797, about whom little is known. What is certain is the fact that Gilbert Stuart knew him well. According to the artist’s daughter, Jane Stuart, Dunn and her father were close friends. Around the turn of the century, the Irishman spent approximately three years

visiting the United States in and around Philadelphia, then the most cosmopolitan of American cities. His aim was to study North American Indian languages. Dunn shared this interest with Morton, whose authorship of two plays, several prose pieces, and many poems with Indian subject matter perhaps accounted for their affinity for one another.

Morton and Dunn likely met between 1797 and 1801 during his junket in Philadelphia, where he commissioned Stuart to paint the Winterthur panel of Morton. Along with contracting her likeness, the Irishman sat for his own portrait. As with Morton, Stuart painted Dunn three times, thus visually capturing the triangulation of the connection among Stuart, Morton, and Dunn. Additionally—again like the trio of Morton portraits—of the three Dunn paintings, Stuart painted two versions on canvas and one panel portrait. Compounding the intrigue of their three-way association, an unfinished head of Dunn, as was the case with the Worcester portrait of Morton, was among the paintings found in Stuart's studio upon his death. Sarah and Perez Morton owned Stuart's panel portrait of Dunn. As was customary at the time, this suggests the possibility that Dunn may have given Morton his portrait in exchange for hers.

Dunn was behind another meaningful transaction on behalf of Morton. He personally delivered a copy of *Beacon Hill* to President George Washington, thereby facilitating her cultivation of a strategic alliance with the leader of the republic. Morton had met Washington sometime while he was in office (1789-1797) during his official visit to her hometown of Boston. On that occasion, Morton maneuvered to link herself to the

revered Washington when she published an honorific commemorating his trip: “Ode for Music, Inscribed to George Washington, upon his public entrance in the town of Boston, during his Presidency.” These, however, were not her only lines inspired by America’s first president. Morton again invoked Washington as her muse for *Beacon Hill*. The astute author dedicated the patriotic verse to General Washington as well as to the Revolutionary soldiers under his command. When the poem was published, its cover page inscribed the epic to “The Citizen Soldiers, under the banners of WASHINGTON and FREEDOM.” Here and throughout her writing career, Morton solved the problem of the male artist/female muse dynamic by simply reversing the equation. The author routinely drew creative inspiration from a masculine muse.

With the 1797 publication of *Beacon Hill*, signed simply “S.M.,” Morton set out to establish her reputation as chronicler and historian of the American Revolution. This poem appeared first in the *Columbian Centinel*, Dec. 4, 1790. Morton revised and lengthened the poem into book form: *Beacon Hill: A local poem, historic and descriptive, Book One*. She also added a dedication to George Washington, who was presented with his copy by Dunn. Widely published and popularly read throughout the region, her patriotic *Beacon Hill*, again in textbook neoclassical couplets, celebrated and assayed to mythologize the revolutionary-era conflict. As was the case with much of her work, this oftentimes stilted verse met with mixed reviews. In his gossipy diary, William Dunlap writes: “I bought Mrs. [Sarah] Morton’s ‘Beacon Hill’ . . . I was displeased with the beginning but afterwards found

much to admire.” However, the work’s debatable literary merits are of less consequence to this study than Morton’s unconventional authorial position and aggressive self-promotion.

Dunn had arrived in the United States around the time of the publication of *Beacon Hill* in 1797 as a representative from the Irish House of Commons. His name appears on Washington’s personal copy of the poem, along with an inscription confirming Dunn’s alliance with both Mortons as well as his high regard for Mrs. Morton’s poetry. Dunn’s passage dates his acquaintance with Mr. Morton to 1798, when the two had at least one encounter in Philadelphia, though it is unclear whether he and Mrs. Morton had actually met by that time. Nevertheless, Dunn knew and admired her writings enough to forward his endorsement to the president, writing: “The charming Poem which accompanies this was committed to my care near four weeks ago by Mr. Morton. By delays on the Road I have unfortunately retarded your Perusal of a Poem dictated by Taste and Genius and displaying like its author an exalted Veneration for you. Philadelphia, Jany. [sic] 9<sup>th</sup> 1798.”

The implication that Dunn knew its author is apparent, though undocumented, yet it is surely possible that Morton had traveled with her husband to Philadelphia prior to 1800. Further, Morton would have assuredly been pleased with Dunn’s recognition of what he considered her “Genius,” an impression of her intellect that was shared by his friend Stuart, who captured the quality on canvas at the behest of Dunn. Stuart’s Winterthur portrait of Morton reinforces the association between Morton and the two friends. Stuart also incorporated into the portrait an allusion of great significance to another of Morton’s male



companions, the revolutionary rake Gouverneur Morris.

### **Revolutionary Liaison: The “Goddess of Revenge” and the “Great Lover with the Wooden Leg”**

Though Morris made but a veiled cameo in Stuart’s *Winterthur* portrait of Morton, the ambassador made a grand impression on the Morton marriage. During the spring of 1800, Mrs. Morton chose the city of Philadelphia as the site of her revenge and, in Morris, found the perfect co-conspirator with whom to launch her retaliatory *liaison*. As a young bride, Morton wrote passionately about her husband’s “soul-illuminated eyes.” However, when Perez seduced Fanny, he virtually extinguished the light from hers. Morton returned to those tumultuous times and to her betrayal by Perez throughout her poetry and prose for the rest of her life. The same eyes that had once entranced the newlywed Morton became lyrical weapons of deceit in her poetry post-scandal, and, if forever embittered, she was not blinded for long. Her poem “Conciliation” described different eyes entirely. Darkened by “sullen suspicion’s cold regardless stare,” the eyes of Perez had become the objects of her contempt.

Having peered into the true character of her husband, Morton would never again look at him the same way. From her verse, it appeared she might have suspected the affair all along. For once his secret machinations were exposed, Morton seemed relieved to no longer endure the indignity. “No more shall hurried steps, in scorn proceed,” she

conceded, “Nor anger flash from quick averted eyes.” Fanny she forgave, but she long held Perez responsible for her favorite sister’s death. While Morton was content, for a time, with a dormant passion—at least as far as her husband was concerned—she was not above wielding his betrayal as her weapon of choice when it suited her. Morton wrote that the only earthly reward women might hope for was “happiness of tranquil submission.” In this instance, Morton’s words did not match her deeds, as she sought vengeance not only in verse but also in kind. “Tranquil submission” was not Morton’s style, nor would she wait for the afterlife for sexual equality, as another of her musings proposed. The “Goddess of Revenge” would exact hers while still on *terra firma* and in plain view of Perez.

Morton’s ardor was at last revived by the dashing Gouverneur Morris—a sophisticated yet earthy man and a popular figure in the salons of France. While American ambassador to France, from 1789 to 1795 during the Reign of Terror, Morris had earned a reputation as a *bon vivant* and the affectionate nickname the “great lover with the wooden leg.” Even after losing his limb in a carriage accident, the imposing Morris maintained a noteworthy athleticism and a magnificent silhouette. The object of Morton’s desire was well known to her husband, who did little to conceal his jealousy about their widely rumored *affaire de coeur*. And, to top off the affront to Perez, Morris was ancestrally French.

Author of the preamble to the Constitution, Morris, whose biographer Richard

Brookhiser has called him the “forgotten founding father,” was just the sort of man that the pretentious Perez fancied himself to be. Morris’ tastes tended toward the European, so he likely would not have been discouraged in an amorous pursuit simply because his romantic interest was married. An experienced lover who enjoyed the chase, Morris had little use for bourgeois propriety. He may have preferred dalliances with married women who, like him, had no unrealistic expectations of the nature of their encounters. Having previously shared a mistress—*salonniere* Adelaide de Flahaut—with French diplomat Talleyrand, Morris obviously considered Perez Morton no serious obstacle. Brookhiser illuminates his subject as unique among founding fathers in his insistence that one’s personal life was as important as one’s life in the public eye. In Morris’ view, being a “gentleman mattered as much” as “being a great man.” The sensual Morris had no internal conflict of interest when it came to choosing between temporal delights and his posthumous legacy. He generally chose the former.

During his tenure as ambassador, Morris dined fervently on the many intellectual and epicurean offerings available to him during the height of the French Revolution. Celebrated Paris *salonniere* Mme. de Damas observed of the American, “he is fond of his ease, does his best to procure it, and enjoys it as much as possible,” adding that “he loves good cheer, good wine, good company.” Morris was especially partial to female company—and women enjoyed his. Likely symptomatic of his carnal weaknesses, Morris remained a bachelor until late in life, so his pleasure-seeking pursuits incurred no serious domestic

casualties.

Morris' tastes extended to risqué French women such as consort the Comtesse de Damas and Mme. de Stael. He even went so far as to shelter the aristocratic Mme. Damas, protecting her from arrest in direct defiance of the French government. His most serious dalliance was with the scandalous Adele de Senage (Mme. Flahaut), with whom Morris carried on for some time. This entanglement likely informed Morris' opinion of her countrymen, as evidenced by this quote from his 1795 letter to an American colleague: "A Frenchman loves his King as he loves his mistress—to madness—because he thinks it great and noble to be mad. He then abandons both the one and the other most ignobly because he cannot bear the continued action of the sentiment he had persuaded himself to feel." Little persuasion, though, seemed necessary for Morris in his pursuit of Sarah Morton. If he was sometimes indulgent, the controlled Morris was never extreme, and his diaries evince that he kept his appetites in check.

Like Morton, Morris spoke beautiful French. He had learned the language as a child, as the Gouverneurs, his mother's family, were third-generation Americans of Huguenot descent. When writing of romantic conquests in his private journals, Morris often chose to do so in French rather than in English. As was his inclination, Morris' account of the liaison between himself and Morton in Philadelphia assumed a French accent. His entries from that period tracked their deepening attraction for one another—according to the conventional courtship rituals of the era—as they documented Morris'

personal tale of seduction and Morton's inevitable submission. Morton, too, had designs and was in all probability more willing than reluctant. She long took pleasure in the memory of Morris and their shared transgression.

**“Monsieur was cordial . . . all things considered”: The Rise and Progress of an American Salonniere**

Morris' scintillating diaries recorded a series of calls at the Mortons' quarters in Philadelphia that were clearly not intended to solicit an audience with Perez. His colorful entries from 1800 to 1801 chronicled a series of overtures directed at Mrs. Morton and revealed him to be an ardent suitor. Morris called. She declined. He called again, and so went the dance until Morton surrendered, not too long afterward, to temptation. Her dangerous liaison with Morris, however, was not merely the product of simple revenge, nor was the affair solely of the carnal variety. Morris and Morton shared an intellectual and sentimental connection as well. Complicated figures both, and bound by their separate scandals, each weathered the conjecture and judgment of their reputation-consumed peers with grace—Morton, perhaps, not without some trepidation. Morris was rarely bothered by what others thought.

The pair also possessed similar literary interests. Though Madison has garnered the acclaim for authorship of the preamble to the Constitution, Morris was its true author and stylist. While never a professional writer, Morris, like Morton, composed poetry as well as short stories. His sensual temperament extended to his writings, and he provided his

stories with evocative titles such as “The Incandescent Lilly” and “If You Touch Them They Vanish.” And in contrast to Perez—whose interest in the literary arts waned when he was no longer the pet subject of his wife’s verse—Morris wrote voraciously. His first mention of Sarah Morton came in a May 5, 1800, diary entry while Morris and the Mortons were in Philadelphia. The passage began innocuously enough, with Morris recording that he went to “see an old acquaintance *Mrs. Morton*.” Noting that Morton was “Looking better than she did in the year 1779,” he continued in a more provocative tone, recalling, “She was then sickening with wounded sensibility which has since been amputated and she has recovered.”

This passage implied that the two had known one another since 1779, which, while perhaps true, would have been when Morton was twenty years old and unmarried. It was not until ten years later, in 1789, when the Morton-Apthorp scandal was exposed, that Mrs. Morton presumably suffered most acutely from “wounded sensibility.” Unless Morton had had a prior injury, Morris may simply have written the date in error. His reference to amputation was perhaps a shot at Perez, for his wife’s affection for him was significantly absent. However, one cannot read Morris’ comment without envisioning his own wooden leg. Either way, the passage exhibits Morris’ rather roguish wit and good humor. The spirited Morris, who was often the butt of his own jokes, would have been a refreshing change from Perez, who was known to take himself quite seriously.

Politically, too, Morris and Morton were in agreement. Both were moderate

Federalists with a hint of the elitism that often characterized those of their shared social standing and background. After dining with the Mortons only two days later, on May 7, the fast-moving Morris made clear that the chase was on. Doubtless taking full advantage of the tendency of the long-winded Perez to soliloquize, Morris—known to tailor his conversation to the interests of his female companions—would have been only too pleased to keep his wife company. Morris wrote on Wednesday, May 7: “After dinner sat the evening with Mrs. Morton where the company is anti-federal.” For her part, Morton likely relished the attention and enjoyed playing the *coquette*. Perhaps she even toyed with the possibility of setting revenge in motion, for she would even the score in less than twenty-four hours.

Morton so occupied the imagination of Morris the following evening that even an audience with President Washington, whom he admired immensely, could not disengage his mounting preoccupation. Early the next morning, Morris documented the gratification of his desires. Regarding the events of the prior evening, a diary entry of Thursday, May 8, reported, “Dinner at the President’s and stay the evening interestingly with Mrs. Morton.” On what was an “interesting” night for both of them, Morton apparently unburdened herself. Morris wrote that she relayed a “curious history,” unleashing all of the sordid details surrounding her husband’s infidelity. An experienced lover, Morris comforted Morton in the manner he knew was expected of a gentleman in his position and finally (*in his carriage*) “secured from her most of what [he] wanted.”

Over the next few days, Morris chronicled the conventional exercises for polite eighteenth-century lovers. The next morning, Morris made the obligatory appearance upon her doorstep, writing, on Friday, May 9: “Call on Mrs. Morton who is abroad in my carriage.” A gentlewoman such as Morton would have required suitable and discreet transport in the hours following their liaison. Further, she and Morris’ carriage likely did not return with alacrity to the residence she shared with her husband. Nevertheless, on Saturday, May 10, Morris made another pass, noting of his schedule that day “. . . visit in the afternoon with President and his Lady. Call on Mrs. Morton who is abroad a little while longer.” Whatever satisfaction she may have felt by obtaining her revenge, Morton probably did not relish facing a sulking Perez. Her vindication came at a price.

The Mortons returned to Dorchester that summer, and Mrs. Morton did not reappear in the diaries of Morris again until about a year and a half later. Early in January 1803, while on an extended excursion in Boston, Morris recounted the events of his day: “get a petition of the judges committee . . . walk 2 miles before the meeting of the Senate and 3 after it . . . and to see Mrs. Morton who is a little indisposed. This is *en regle*.” Evidently in one of their first encounters since the summer of their affair, Morton made herself unavailable. Though the hobbled Morris walked five full miles that day, his efforts were unrewarded. Unfazed, Morris knew that her actions were *en regle*—part of the game.

Although the two would remain friends, Morris made no new mention of his onetime *amour* until later that year, when he recorded his final thoughts on their affair. In



mid-summer, Morris met his romantic rival Perez face to face on Morton's home turf, recalling a July 1803 dinner "*à trois*" at Morton Pavilion in Dorchester. Their erotic encounter a *fait accompli*, the pair of lovers set about reestablishing a less-scandalous liaison. Of the *Jacobin* Perez, Morris remarked, "monsieur was cordial all things considered." The entire affair was very sophisticated. Just two years later, in 1805, Morris, with his new wife, Nancy Randolph, would host Sarah and Perez Morton at Morris' estate in New York, *Morrisania*.

Morton would not have her last words on the subject until 1823. She took the opportunity provided by the publication of *My Mind and Its Thoughts* to include a previously unreleased poem, "Characteristic Portrait, delineated from life by an invisible spirit, for a man of worth and genius, inscribed to the same." Morton did not name the "invisible spirit"; however, her footnote hinted at his identity. The lines were intended for an unnamed—though not unknown—"diplomatic character, recently returned to the retirement of his own country." Neither did the coy author supply a date for her suggestive composition. Morton did, however, include a detail that leaves little doubt about her own infidelity as well as the identity of her consort. Confessing that while the verse was originally intended for print, she said that she had withheld the poem until that time in 1823 for reasons of decorum, the "possible impropriety [of] which might have been attached to the motive of the author, had she been discovered, restraining her temerity."

Morton would have surely been discovered, for the poem itself provided quite a

few clues, only thinly disguising that Morris was her muse. The most obvious was her reference to her subject's disability. In alluding to Morris' wooden leg, she described her subject as one who had "sense to give deformity a charm." As she had rhapsodized about the "soul-illuminated eyes" of Perez in her earlier poem, Morton memorialized the eyes of her lover in verse. Morris' were "warmed by the speaking eyes electric beam" and overrode the insolent stares she had once endured from her husband: "That eye, whose varying powers such truth convey,/So dark, yet brilliant, so serene, yet gay,/Its glance so gentle, with such strength combined, it seems the moving index of the mind." In what was one of her better efforts, perhaps a result of true feeling, the lines fairly lilted in comparison to the at-times rather jarring stylings that characterized much of her other work. The fascinating man who inspired some of Morton's finer verse was aligned with many of the great salonniere of the late eighteenth-century in Europe and in America. Stuart acknowledged Morris' connection to Morton through his depiction of the first republican woman-of-ideas in art. Chapter Five investigates the history of the relationship between the painter and the poet and the circumstances that led to their deep friendship and Stuart's three captivating portrayals of Morton.

## Chapter Five

### **Lifting the Veil on the Enigmatic Mrs. M.: Gilbert Stuart's Revolutionary Portrait of an American Woman of Ideas**

I stood among them, but not of them—  
In a shroud of thoughts which were not *their* thoughts.  
— George Gordon, Lord Byron (1812)

Sarah Morton selected these lines from Byron's long poem *Childe Harold* for the epigraph of her *My Mind and Its Thoughts, in Sketches, Fragments, and Essays* (1823). Morton's volume, published near the end of her life, is a literary self-portrait of this prolific writer and complicated figure who straddled the republican and Romantic moments of American intellectual thought. Byron's sentiment captures well the mood of the enigmatic woman as she appeared in the three portraits by Stuart. Morton's mind, her character, held sufficient sway over the artist's imagination that he made three attempts to elaborate her essence on canvas. Each one of these portraits was begun more than ten years earlier by Gilbert Stuart. The trio is a painted tableau of the deepening connection between the preeminent American artist and his misunderstood muse, envisioning an unspoken conversation between creative allies.

Stuart's group of portraits, complemented by Morton's writings regarding Stuart, offer evidence of a longtime collaboration between the painter and the poet. Eternally allied through the sister graces of painting and poesy, the parallel arts of Stuart and Morton work together to represent their mutual exploration on the nature of the muse in artistic inspiration. On a broader level, the portraits can be read as Stuart's meditation on the

intellectual capabilities of eighteenth-century women as well as his progressive attempt to represent Morton as an American woman of ideas.

Morton's expedition to Philadelphia from the summer of 1800 to the spring of 1801 proved momentous for her. It was then that she first made the acquaintance of Stuart. Just as significant, the city was the site of Morton's public revenge and private vindication—the place where she and her paramour, Gouverneur Morris, flagrantly commenced their scandalous courtship. Morton likely visited the painter's studio as she was conducting her illicit affair with Morris and may have taken the artist into her confidence during their sessions (a circumstance that in part accounts for the enigmatic and, for their day, seductive quality of the Winterthur and Worcester portraits).

However, her time in Philadelphia presented more for Morton than the opportunity to even the score with Perez. Socially, intellectually, and as an author, Morton capitalized on the city's cosmopolitan character during the buoyant founding era as she solidified her position as literary hostess and premier American *salonniere*. While Mr. Morton attended to civic pursuits, his wife, who had already made a national name for herself as an author, attended to pursuits of her own. Her personal and public writings during those years chronicled her heady days as a politician's wife as well as conveyed Morton's inner conflict regarding her circumscribed role as a woman in the public eye. Occupying equal time in Morton's imagination, though, was the status of all women in an enlightened republic—politically, vocationally, educationally, and even romantically.

Perhaps as early as 1800, Morton first sat for Gilbert Stuart at his Germantown painting-rooms just outside Philadelphia. The time that Stuart and Morton spent together resulted in an uncommon grouping of portraits that operate in a multilayered manner and through sophisticated interdependent channels. In each of his Morton renderings and through the public spectacle of the portrait event, Stuart acknowledged the scandalous past of his muse as he honored the privacy of his friend. In particular, Stuart's fascinating and often-reproduced Worcester portrayal of Morton helped to focus modern academic attention first upon his mysterious subject and consequently upon her work. Long after both of their deaths, their mutual public promotional enterprise was still at play. Were it not for the artistic vision of Stuart, it can be argued, Morton's national legacy may have been lost among the pages of literary miscellany. Until quite recently, her writings, though widely read during her day, had not garnered much interest from scholars or historians of American literature.

Further, the artist drew a (literally) veiled critique of the hypocrisy of a reputation-obsessed late-eighteenth-century culture that held Morton's past against her. When the portraits are viewed together, the painted exchange between Stuart and Morton also occupies a more transcendent realm. In late-eighteenth-century America, the Romantic construct of the artistic genius that holds converse with the muse for divine inspiration was just beginning to take hold. Stuart embodied this ideal. In the vanguard in this respect, Stuart cultivated the public persona of an eccentric artist, and, similar to his confidant

Morton, his body of work demonstrates both the republican and Romantic impulses in American intellectual history.

### **Lost in Translation: West, Stuart, and the Grand Manner in American Art**

When Morton and Stuart met, the painter's celebrity was on the rise. Portraiture was always the primary art form in the New World and well-patronized by elites. As the republic grew, portraiture gained in popularity and portrait painters were in high demand during the years following the American Revolution. So when Rhode Island native Stuart returned from Britain in 1793, where he had studied under fellow American Benjamin West (1738-1820), he was perfectly poised to launch his career. While overseas, Stuart had acquired the artistic pedigree to support his American launch. The artist's time spent studying under his prestigious mentor, the Pennsylvanian émigré West, only heightened Stuart's credibility. West, the first American artist to earn a widespread reputation in Europe, was hailed as the "American Raphael" in Britain, where his permanent relocation in 1763 and his talents as a painter of history were richly rewarded. West became a founding member of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768, eventually succeeding the august Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) as president of the elite organization. King George III developed a fondness for the promising American, eventually decreeing West historical painter to the king and granting him an annual allowance of greater than one thousand

pounds. In this role, his mythologized the glories of the British Empire and the heroic virtues of his adopted country's aristocracy.

The influence of West was not limited to the Old World. His example as artist and mentor made considerable waves on this side of the Atlantic. Although the provincial painter was among the first to make the leap to London, many American hopefuls followed suit. When those aspirants arrived in England, West was typically happy to take them under his wing. For fledgling American painters, a tour through West's painting-rooms was a rite of passage. West served as teacher and adviser, opening his doors to serious students and compatriots, including Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) and his son, Raphael (1774-1825), John Trumbull (1756-1843), and Washington Allston (1779-1843). Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872) and Thomas Sully (1783-1872) were among the other painters who studied under West with the hope of elevating the American "republic of taste." A letter of introduction was not always required for entrance into West's world—an American accent would usually suffice. Many of these American disciples returned home armed with his techniques and ideas to aid in the foundation of a national style. The development of the visual arts in the United States owes much to the American court painter. While Stuart always respected the generosity of his mentor, he did not always follow West's artistic lead. His portraits are identifiable as the work of an individualistic painter who emphasized invention and characterization above the priority placed on the Grand Manner that predominated during the eighteenth century.

West was the preeminent history painter in the English-speaking world at a time when history—or Grand Manner—painting was considered art's highest achievement. Thanks in large part to Reynolds' *Discourses*, a select cohort of academicians and artists reinforced this perception of the superiority of history painting. Reynold's series of fifteen lectures delivered at the academy between 1769 and 1790 advanced a hierarchy of painting that relegated portraiture to a lesser position. For many European painters, portraiture presented neither the challenge nor the opportunity to display their invention or learning. From the point of view of many fine artists, portraiture deserved its comparatively low rank. However, for all of the lip service paid to the genre by British intellectuals throughout the eighteenth century, history painting struggled even in England to find an audience and consistent patronage. As in America, the less-academically respected genre of portraiture thrived.

British art theorists were largely dependent on the philosophical and aesthetic treatises of other Europeans, particularly French, Italian, and German intellectuals and critics. Indeed, many of the revolutionary transformations in the visual arts brought about by the continental Renaissance did not penetrate the British Isles until early in the seventeenth century. Since early eighteenth-century British writers on art had no real homegrown resources, they were forced to look beyond their shores for a theoretical language and inspiration. Overall, the European meditations on the intricacies of painting's hierarchies lost something in their translation to American soil. Most specifically, the



European relegation of portraiture to second-class status did not exactly resonate in a democracy in which a commitment to pluralism discouraged any aristocratic ambition. David Rosand, among others, suggests that Americans “stood suspicious of the grandly heroic gesture, which seemed ultimately, and inevitably, inspired by the art of ‘monarchical subordination.’” So in New World art, paintings generally did not assume the monumental format characteristic of those rendered in the Grand Manner.

The Peales were avid proponents of Grand Manner painting and instrumental in the importation of the style back home in Philadelphia. Despite their advocacy and that of a few other republican-era painters who promoted the style, most American patrons never really developed a taste for the sweeping heroic scenes, idealized human figures, and oftentimes rather forced references to the classical antecedents preferred by European theorists and supported by their institutional commissioners—traditionally the church or the monarchy. For Gilbert Stuart, painting Washington in a toga and Grecian sandals was never a serious option. American patrons, it seems, had little room for painters of history.

History paintings (and landscapes) simply were not, in the American mind, invested with the same sort of symbolic and pecuniary properties as portraits. As in Europe, however, most of the high-minded painters preferred base concerns such as the exchange of money to be left out of the equation, theoretically at least. In the republic, portraiture was the genre of choice—a preference of which Stuart approved wholeheartedly. Stuart, who cared little for academic theory and less for pretense, painted little else and delighted in his

specialization. The artist once famously quipped, in frank derogation of the reverence for history painting in Europe, “No man ever painted history if he could obtain employment in portraits.” Susan Rather’s comment regarding the “perverse pleasure” taken by Stuart in “opposing the artistic establishment and its high valuation of history painting” is relevant here.

Stuart received invaluable tutelage from West and always remembered his largesse as an instructor. What is more, he honored the same timeless tradition once back home by acting as mentor to many young hopefuls in America. Though he never followed West’s lead to become a painter of history, he made a significant impression on the eminent painter of history. Temple Franklin, who was traveling in London in 1784, wrote to his grandfather Benjamin recounting the artistic triumph of Stuart: “Stuart was esteemed by West and everybody [as] the first portrait painter now living. . . . I have seen several of his performances which appear to me very great indeed! I heard West say that he ‘*nails* the face to the canvas.’”

Stuart was famous among his contemporaries for rendering superb likenesses. In his 1834 biographical sketch of the painter, Dunlap gives Stuart a resounding endorsement: “I am free to say, that I never saw a portrait by Stuart that did not show a skill in handling, and a mind in dictating, far above mediocrity. His best pictures are beyond all praise.” By the time of his homecoming, Stuart’s reputation for taking perfect likenesses preceded him. In addition, the artist possessed the cachet that London training bestowed. Once Stuart was

back in America, Dunlap called on the new arrival at his New York painting-rooms, where he too was impressed with what he saw: “it appeared as if [I] had never seen portraits before, so decidedly was form and mind conveyed to the canvas.” He also noted that the high-living yet impecunious painter was always a “stranger to prudence” and “the gayest of the gay.”

Stuart was not only content to be a painter of faces: he embraced the role. The American native broke free of the restraints of the classical tradition upon his homecoming to found republican painting anew—a sort of personal declaration of independence from his mentor, the conventions of European classicism, and the British Academy *in toto*. And he did so with *panache*. No mere mechanic copying likenesses in exchange for money, the brilliant Stuart fashioned a visual vernacular to go along with the definitive written texts that have come to symbolize national American identity. Though many of Stuart’s paintings look very British stylistically, his bold handling of paint and moody compositions are, generally speaking, highly individualistic and informed by his preoccupation with capturing the very essence of his esteemed sitters. And Stuart painted just about every figure of import of the early republic, from politicians of all party affiliations and the military elite to society’s leading ladies. He is probably the artist most responsible for creating the visual iconography of the republic that today still populates the collective American imagination. As a shrewd observer of the human form and also of human nature, Stuart created a body of work that represents an ideal prism through which to peer into the republican past. And in his capacity as the foremost portraitist of the republic, Stuart found himself in the company of some of the most influential players in the early national American drama. His many fine portraits reflect, refract, and comment upon eighteenth-century American

constructions of virtue and vice, notions of what constituted public and private virtue, ideals of acceptable masculine and feminine attributes, and the developing national and individual identities.

Robert Hughes has succinctly observed about the American Revolution that the upheaval “gave artists a new subject: now that America had a history with its own large repercussions on the world, and a cast of heroes and Founding Fathers to match, it needed icons of both.” Gilbert Stuart set his sights on creating these icons. With no glorious heritage to celebrate on canvas, Americans instead turned their eyes toward the future and to the monumentality of their task. Consequently, the typical arts patrons were less concerned with purchasing art that depicted scenes from their nation’s brief past than with the personification of the republican moment. For both the patrons and painters of the new republic, history still had to be written and painted. The conviction, common among the nation’s founders, that they were engaged in a singular enterprise that would alter the course of human history, informed their every decision. Portrait painting thrived in the propitious environment, as did the painter who was capable of capturing the likenesses—and the spirit—of the men and women of the times. Stuart was a master of both. Indeed, Stuart’s portraits of the first five presidents, along with their multiple reproductions, reprints, and copies, have informed American impressions of the founders and of collective core national values since their inception.

### **The Worthy Subject: Gender and Eighteenth-Century Portraiture**

Portrait painting had begun to come into its own even before the Revolution;

however, by the last decades of the century, sitting for one's portrait was becoming increasingly common. By 1800, portraits for mass consumption—in the form of the physiognomic trace or silhouette—were readily available. In addition, such images were quick and cheap. Portraiture could also play a significant role in the development of one's sense of self. For many, having one's portrait taken was tantamount to a declaration of subject worthiness—a statement about one's worth as an individual. Further, for the growing number of middle-class citizens who were eager to define their position in society and the marketplace, the time-consuming and costly nature of sitting for one's formal portrait presented two obstacles well worth overcoming. Lovell says it succinctly:

Americans bought portraits. They did not buy landscapes, still lifes, or genre scenes; they did not even branch out into portraits of horses or houses. They focused solely—but enthusiastically—on portraits of individuals, couples, and occasionally families.

The portrait, it seems, satisfied a specific need for an anxious, even insecure, patronage eager to define itself in a new and uncertain world.

In any era, the portrait and the process of sitting for it encapsulate the nexus between the public and private realms of the subject—the actual art object, the index of the portrait event. In the American context, republican portraiture illustrated well the anxious intersection of the *public* and the *private*, as the terms relate both to individual and national identity in America's founding years. Like the many painted subjects who preceded them, self-conscious republican consumers—male and female—soon set about fashioning public images that projected the ideal to which they aspired. Before turning to the work of Stuart

specifically, a quick overview of the conventions of eighteenth-century portraiture as they relate to gender is useful.

Eighteenth-century portraits in Europe and America, while often aspirational in nature, adhered to a fairly standardized set of practices. Over the course of the century, American portraiture developed a set of coded conventions deemed appropriate for depicting ideal men and women in a virtuous republic. In their representations of the sexes, most portrait painters were guided by contemporary stereotypes of gender and by pictorial conventions indicative of masculinity and femininity derived largely from European models. The same set of standards that regulated an individual's public and private behavior roughly applied to the business of sitting for one's portrait. Once their portraits had been completed, the painted and framed exemplars of republicanism often further reinforced contemporary limiting constructions regarding separate avenues to authority and power. Less often, portraiture could challenge the prevailing assumptions that feminine access to authority resided solely in the domestic arena or that men exclusively exercised power in the public sphere. In contrast to this norm, each of Stuart's paintings of Morton, including even the most conventional *Boston* portrait, presents his alternative vision of the locus of feminine authority.

Though images of both American men and women generally conformed to well-established standards, female visual representations from the epoch were especially formulaic—from one portrait to the next, their painted heads seem almost interchangeable.

When subjects were individualized at all, uniqueness in late-eighteenth-century feminine portraiture usually surfaced via symbols signifying the culturally prescribed, and decidedly domestic, accomplishments of the female sitter. With the occasional exception of portraits of mothers, who might be identified through symbols representing a specific child—such as painted hands clasping a locket with a picture of an infant who had died—feminine images from the period look very much alike.

The generic emblems of refinement, a commonplace of contemporary portraits of women, were intended to add an air of gentility to the elite female sitter rather than to express any originality, or even personality, on her part. For example, an amiable sitter may have distinguished herself in the arena of fruit arrangement. Accordingly, the artist presented her with pear in hand. Or perhaps the painter depicted an industrious young subject as she was engrossed in embroidery or some other intricate needlework. Even the talentless sitter could acquire mastery of a skill through fictional settings imagined by an inventive painter who memorialized the ruse on canvas.

By contrast, portraits of men were more individualized while still promoting traditional masculine characteristics and, later in the century, republican virtues such as civility, integrity, and seriousness of purpose. Like his female counterparts, a male subject might commission a portrait to celebrate his upcoming nuptials, but he could also document on canvas the receipt of an inheritance or the assumption of some noteworthy public office. If the subjects were still represented as *types*, male sitters were more often represented as

active figures—very often standing—flanked by the symbolic props of their vocation. A successful merchant might have been depicted with a ledger, surrounded by his wares, whereas a military man was shown standing in uniform, astride a stallion, or perhaps wielding a sword. The important distinction is that masculine subjects were more often painted as figures with personalized attributes in settings that highlighted their real-life achievements in the world.

In female portraiture, the term *sitter* cannot be overemphasized. Painted women were most often literally depicted as sitting engrossed in an activity that accentuated their femininity. Naturally predisposed for external approval alone, women could nevertheless enjoy some personal indulgences while sequestered in the sanctity of their own homes. Rare, however, is the portrait designed to explicitly privilege a female sitter's intellectual prowess over her more-superficial attributes. Stuart's female portraits, though less studied by art historians than his heroic republican males, are a notable exception. And the female subject was almost never surrounded by stacks of books, though she could surely read, or any other evidence of higher learning. When women were painted with books in hand, the prop was generally intended to connote piety, wealth, or refinement as opposed to intellectual pursuits or as an emblem of authorship.

### **Reading Women: Portraiture and the Literate Woman**

With the expansion of the popular press and rising female literacy, the implications of the book as a symbol in late-eighteenth-century took on great significance and, for really



the first time, assumed progressive interpretive possibilities. Images of women painted with books or in the act of reading are an important subgenre of portraiture that merits noting here. Very little substantive scholarship exclusively addresses American portraits of women depicted in the act of reading however Linda J. Docherty's essay "Women as Readers: Visual Interpretations" provides a useful starting point for the discussion. She offers a good introduction to the form, but she moves from the colonial period to the early nineteenth century without touching upon republican-era portraits of women reading. The late eighteenth-century, a period marked by high rates of female literacy, was arguably the most important historical moment for such paintings.

Bergman-Carton addresses the broader history of images of the reader in western art, pointing out the well-established body of work relating to art in which a book appears as a mere symbol or prop. As she asserts in a discussion of European representations of portraits of women reading, such paintings underwent "subtle revisions" during the nineteenth century in response to the "changing female condition." In republican-era America, the female condition had already begun to change. More women had been reading more freely for some time. And whereas the foundations of portraiture were drawn from European models, the subtle revisions of images of women reading had begun to appear in Stuart's American paintings a bit earlier.

### **Face Fetish: The Preeminence of Portraiture in Stuart's Boston**

During the latter decades of the eighteenth century, New World portrait painters

were fully aware that they were creating the new national face. Whereas West had been hired to memorialize the British Empire, Stuart was charged with creating the icons of the post-revolutionary American moment. Stuart's body of work envisions many of the fundamental visual archetypes that have come to epitomize the world's first modern republic. And with his portraits of Morton, Stuart added his interpretation of the first American woman of ideas to his impressive cast of national icons. Eager to make his way to the nation's capital and the ready-made patronage the city proffered, Stuart stayed in New York for only a short period between 1793 and 1794. His next stop was Philadelphia, where he intended to paint the most famous man in America, George Washington.

In fact, the idea of memorializing the internationally renowned general and president was in large part the impetus for the debt-ridden artist's return to America. Stuart recognized that his reputation as well as his personal finances would only be enhanced by his association with Washington. When in 1794 he finally secured the prestigious commission to paint the first president in 1794, Stuart boldly told a friend, "I expect to make a fortune by Washington' . . . thus openly acknowledg[ing] what artists had long known," despite protests to the contrary—that their own reputations were linked to the prestige and reputation of their sitters. Painting Washington was indeed a boon for Stuart, and Washington's likeness was agreed by all who saw it to be the man himself. Stuart, though, was never completely satisfied with their encounters, however; the president's

portrait did not suffer. A solicitous Stuart found the stoic president the most difficult of all of his subjects, and the master conversationalist was for once at a loss for words.

Nevertheless, Stuart profited greatly from his affiliation with Washington—both his career and artistic legacy in America were solidified as a result of their sittings. Stuart’s now mythic money-maker head of Washington—the successful product of their awkward encounters—was, along with the Worcester portrait of Morton, recovered from the artist’s studio upon his death.

Once the widely hailed painter was established in Philadelphia, it soon became the fashion for the leading ladies to have a Stuart portrait. And over the next ten years or so, Stuart became the American equivalent of a court painter. Almost no one of consequence eluded his fabled brush. Stuart’s popularity while working in the temporary federal capital is confirmed in a letter to Dolley Madison in which her correspondent reports, “I can tell you nothing new. Stuart is all the rage. He is almost worked to death, and everyone afraid they will be the last to be finished.” The socially astute future first lady—and budding republican salonniere—would have to wait for Stuart’s 1803 move to Washington, D.C., before she sat for her own portrait. When the capital relocated, Stuart followed to take advantage of its many rich possibilities for commissions. However, Stuart, characteristically restless, remained in Washington just two years before he relocated for the last time to Morton’s hometown of Boston.

Stuart’s much-anticipated 1805 arrival in Boston, where there was a relatively well-

established tradition of portraiture yet no preeminent artist, and where the painter was socially well connected, promised both consistent patronage and an energetic cultural scene. In cultural centers such as Boston, the significance of sitting for one's portrait was particularly palpable, and Stuart was quick to exploit the city's natural resources. Massachusetts Senator Jonathan Mason was among those who encouraged Stuart to set up shop in Boston, assuring the painter of lucrative commissions from his family and other connections. Significantly, the move also placed Stuart in proximity to friend and muse Morton. Several Stuart scholars, including Mount and McLanathan, credit romantic inducements on the part of Morton for contributing to his decision to head north. However, their suggestions of a love affair between the two friends are founded upon opinion rather than fact. Morton surely used her influence as well as her verse on behalf of Stuart once he arrived, and her many well-to-do contacts fairly descended upon the artist's studio shortly after his move to the city.

His motivations for leaving Washington, however, were manifold. Stuart's shaky financial circumstances and mounting number of unfinished canvases—most notably his incomplete portraits of high-visibility figures such as James Madison, John Adams, and then president Thomas Jefferson, originating from his time in the two national capitals—were compelling reasons for the impecunious painter to seek out fresh ground and less-impatient patronage. Early national Boston offered Stuart an ideal climate for artistic growth and experimentation as well as a colorful cast of characters from all sides of the

political, intellectual, and social spectrum. Although Boston was not the nerve center that it had been during the years preceding the Revolutionary War, the social aspects of portrait painting characterized by group visits to the studio among friends were virtually the same. Compared to relatively cosmopolitan cities like Philadelphia and, increasingly, Washington, Boston was no more than a big town. Stuart could dominate the local visual arts community with virtually no competition from other portrait painters. From his studio in the seaport town, Stuart was able to divide his attention between the creation (and in some cases the completion) of iconic images of the era's founding figures and the crafting of his singular visions of lesser-known republican individuals. And, Boston patrons placed a premium on the portrait as a document, commodity, and work of art.

### **Self-Interest vs. "Disinterest": Commerce, Virtue, and Portraiture as Public Relations**

The new American arts patrons and their private family-owned portrait collections became active players in the public market economy of the eighteenth century. Other luxury goods like handcrafted cabinets and imported fabrics experienced a similar boom. But portraits were unique and came to occupy a special place in the households and also the imagination and identity of the new nation. As the century progressed, and as families and individuals amassed more personal (and inheritable) wealth, the demand for portraits grew accordingly. Despite the cost of having one's portrait painted, a taste for paintings was in full force in the colonies by mid-century, specifically paintings of individuals.

Unlike in Britain where many artists prospered, finding the academies and patronage necessary to practice and advertise their craft, being a painter in America required a bit more ingenuity. American artists had to not only “produc[e] but actively market an expensive, rather singular commodity.” For painters—at home, but, also abroad—that sometimes meant orchestrating innovative means for promoting their services. For sitters, whose prestige could enhance the reputation of a struggling artist, and vice versa, the portrait event afforded numerous opportunities for unpredictable alliances and social advancement.

Portraiture had long been the public relations instrument of European aristocracies, and the genre similarly came to serve those ends in the American republic. This development was fortuitous for those who felt victimized or misrepresented by the press, or simply for those self-conscious strivers as the portrait enterprise provided an avenue for public and private figures to mount a response—for a fee.

Though many eighteenth-century portraits featured male subjects, the genre’s early critics dismissed portraiture as mere “face painting” indulged in by immodest female sitters. The performative component of feminine accomplishments, which encouraged objective styles of looking, had complicated the function of the domestic sphere—the backdrop celebrated in conventional female portraiture. As a result, the portrait genre became increasingly associated with the perceived vanity of its female subjects. For the success of republican portraiture as a commodity and a public relations tool, it was necessary to sever

the genre's stereotypical ties with vanity—the most anti-republican of characteristics. In an effort to dissociate the two while securing the patronage of the growing female market, painters derived a solution. Women's natural, exterior focus, it was reasoned, was a permissible focus for works of art so long as the sitter was placed in interior settings.

For virtuous republican men, developing a rationale for sitting for their portraits presented a different challenge. The real stumbling block for eighteenth-century observers was negotiating the rather indelicate relationship between *commerce* and *virtue* which, as David Solkin has prudently noted, the two have “rarely been the best of friends.” In Britain and in America a union between the two former foes—commerce and virtue, that is—was required for free markets and, more to the point, for private individuals to thrive and prosper. Solkin's *Painting for Money* constructs a compelling argument that the art of painting played a significant part in resolving the longstanding ethical dilemma of how to reconcile self-interest with “disinterest,” or impartiality. However, the traditional assumption of a lack of civility implicit in all matters commercial made this a difficult balancing act.

The question became how to recast material prosperity as a source of moral virtue while keeping the wheels of commerce rolling. The solution came in the emergence of a culture of politeness as a means of civilizing commercial transactions between individuals in the late eighteenth century. And British artists and writers of this era—towering personages like Sir Joshua Reynolds, and, later, William Blake—endeavored to account for

the role that painting would play in this new (and decidedly uncivil) market economy. Solkin suggests that painting itself invested a “congeries of private individuals” with the “character of a public.” And the characters of this new public saw themselves as subjects worthy of inhabiting not only a higher station but also a canvas in a gilded frame. The upwardly mobile Britons wanted to picture themselves for posterity, preferably painted by the best artist they could afford. These social strivings, however, were not always met with the approbation that was likely the motivation for the sitting in the first place.

Like their British contemporaries, Americans wanted to see themselves framed for the future. They were perhaps even more anxious about their reputations and public image in a land where such concerns were more fluid and where external signifiers—of class and heritage—were less apparent. During the republic, an individual’s physical appearance was bound up with eighteenth-century notions about sensibility and selfhood, with constructions of public and private virtue. One’s public face (or image) served to reify one’s private reputation. The reverse was also true. Sitting for a portrait could amount to baring one’s soul for public consumption—a financial and expressive exchange between the public and private spheres.

Portraits represented more than simply a symbol of status or personal wealth. Ostensibly, portraits served the documentary function of preserving the physical appearance of a loved one; however, their commissions were not always that straightforward. In the elite domestic sphere, portraits of impressive ancestors or perhaps



living patriarchal figures hung prominently, operating as visual indicators of the establishment or maintenance of authority within the familial economy. Since there were no art galleries or dealers and no state-sponsored academies for their public exhibition, very few people would ever see most privately commissioned paintings. Furthermore, there would not have been much of an audience for portraits of private citizens, no matter how attractive or accomplished, even if such artworks were available for viewing.

A luxury to be sure, portraiture offered the sitter an opportunity to aspire, even conspire—assuming that the painter was feeling complicit—in the creation of whatever public persona he or she desired. In eighteenth-century America, the portrait painter could function as publicist to the privileged, assisting in the advancement of his sitter's public profile. Stuart was hardly above the practice, particularly when financially strapped, as Dunlap records in regard to the artist's brief New York career, during which he “favoured the renowned, the rich, and the fashionable.” The at times desultory painter was also shrewd, and by “exercising his skill for their [his sitters] gratification,” Dunlap observed, Stuart “gave present *éclat* and a *short-lived immortality* in exchange for a portion of their wealth.” Having one's portrait taken by Stuart could confer social credibility upon the sitter.

Yet irrespective of an individual's success or failure in the realm of self-promotion, the activity of posing for one's portrait was a potentially pleasurable experience. Sittings were recognized social pastimes among well-to-do Americans, and the events were often

occasioned by lively conversation and exchanges of gossip. No matter where he set up shop, Stuart's painting-rooms were meccas for students of art, aspirants to social or historical fame, and intellectual luminaries alike. Wine flowed and the atmosphere was generally convivial, if sometimes heated. Witty repartee distinguished Stuart's colloquial style, and he encouraged the same from those in his aura. Fellow painter and admirer John Neagle recalled that Stuart was "particularly eloquent on the subject of arts and artists," yet "when he wished he could wield the weapons of satire and ridicule with peculiar force."

However, with his sitters—and in order to draw out their true character—Stuart's plan was to "keep up an agreeable but gentle conversation, keeping his mind free and fixed on his work." Agitation did not advance the ends of the artist or subject. Furthermore, as a social outlet for women—and Stuart was hardly blind to feminine wiles—the portrait event presented an infrequent socially sanctioned opportunity to interact with a heterogeneous group of people. For the individual sitter, as Lippincott indicates, the selection of an "appropriate artist, pose, costume, and setting could be as satisfying to the psyche as a session in front of some magically flattering mirror." Stuart, though, was known for neither consistently flattering the psyche nor the countenance of those who sat for him.

During image-conscious republican America, this dynamic was particularly charged and necessitated expert handlers. For example, in an effort to counter a negative public image, the newly savvy members of the middle class, or even a revered artist, could parlay their influence to encourage newspapers to cover the portrait event. Morton, Stuart, and

Dennie deftly accomplished just such a task in *Port Folio*.

What is more, the portrait event could enhance one's public image via the tributary poem strategically planted in the local press or national journals. The maturation of social portraiture, in tandem with the explosion of the printed word, presented both novel opportunities and challenges to use portraiture and the press as a tool for the management of one's public image. Morton employed similar tactics on behalf of her prominent, if at times controversial, cohort on several occasions. The aim for the sitters would have been to elicit laudatory descriptions of their beauty, virtue, or military prowess while elevating their social visibility. When such publicized praise was proffered—unsolicited, of course, by an objective observer such as a poet—the vanity of the subject was beyond reproach.

However, there was no guarantee that the press would collude. Influential players in literary circles, such as Morton and Dennie, could have easily published flattering pieces to help bolster the reputations of their friends. And the revered Stuart was rarely lacking in publicity-seeking clients. Less well-connected strivers may have encountered greater obstacles in their attempted ascent up the late-eighteenth-century social ladder. The mutual affection between Stuart and Morton ultimately served both personal and commercial ends

### **“Upon Stuart’s Easel”: The Three Faces of Sarah Morton and a Question of Order**

Much has been made of the similar appearances among the faces of the *Boston*, *Winterthur*, and *Worcester* portraits. Barratt and Miles are the most recent Stuart scholars to comment upon the commonalities confirmed in 1902 by Morton's great-grandson, John

Morton Clinch. Unaware that the Worcester version existed, Clinch happened upon the painting for the first time and recognized his celebrated ancestor instantly. He was surprised to come across the portrait as part of an exhibition entitled “A Loan Collection of Portraits and Pictures of Fair Women” at Boston’s Copley Hall. The *Worcester* portrait was hanging next to another work with which he was quite familiar—the Clinches had loaned a Stuart portrait of Morton to the exhibition as well. The painting now known as the *Boston* portrait had long occupied a prized position in his ancestral home.

Anxious to learn more about his discovery and “desirous to have his niece make a copy,” Clinch wrote a letter to the curator of the Worcester Art Museum on April 3 of that year. He mentioned two Stuart paintings of Morton that remained in his family’s possession—the *Boston* canvas and the *Winterthur* portrait painted on mahogany panel. In his missive, Clinch identified the *Boston* portrait as the original, adding, “we have a copy of this on panel made by Stuart for an admirer of Mrs. Morton.” Mr. Clinch’s assertion aside, controversy remains regarding both the dating and the order of execution of Stuart’s three portraits of Morton. Art historians, Stuart scholars, and Morton biographers alike disagree on these questions.

The conclusions of one of Stuart’s earliest biographers, George C. Mason (1820-1894), bolster Clinch’s contention regarding the sequence in which the portraits were painted. Mason’s 1879 study supports his theory that the *Boston* portrait is the original—that is, painted from life—and further that the *Winterthur* panel is the second of

the group. Mason was the first to identify the “admirer,” adding that the panel was painted “without sittings at the request of Counsellor Dunn, and at his death the family sent it to Mrs. Morton.” Although Mason successfully verified the portrait’s commissioner and, along with Morton’s great-grandson, maintained that the Boston oil-on-canvas was the original, the speculation by art historians on the matter of dating as well as the order in which Stuart executed the three Morton portraits varies widely.

The opinion of Stuart biographer Lawrence Park is the reverse of Mason’s. Writing in 1926, Park proposed that the face of the mysterious Worcester version is the original upon which the *Boston* portrait was based. Barratt and Miles agree and further suggest that the painting was “very likely to be the original life portrait” from which the other two portraits were derived. Another writer on the subject, Paul S. Harris, has contributed greatly to the confusion with his mistaken impression that Stuart had painted four portraits of Morton. In his 1964 article, which focuses principally on the *Winterthur* painting, Harris suggests that the panel portrait was painted “probably from a life study in 1801 or 1802.” While offering no support for his position beyond this declaration, his theory, if true, would have rendered the “copy” explanation untenable. Harris further proposes that the two finished portraits—the *Boston* and the *Winterthur*—were the product of the initial encounter between Morton and Stuart at Philadelphia.

The *Worcester* portrait, according to Harris’s formulation, was the final of the group and was commenced later in Boston—sometime after Stuart’s move to that city in

1805. In addition, Harris inaccurately states that Mr. Clinch, whose family had contributed but one Morton portrait to the “Fair Lady” exhibition at Copley Hall, had loaned three portraits in total. Add that to the Worcester portrait—then on loan to Copley Hall from the Worcester Art Museum—and that makes four Stuart portraits of Morton, when in fact only three were painted.

Unlike Park, Harris’ contemporary Charles Merrill Mount, also writing in 1964, contended that the *Worcester* portrait was not the first. Again in line with Harris and according to Mount’s loosely researched reconstruction of events, Stuart did not even begin the Worcester portrait until well after the painter’s removal to Boston. Mount proffered an additional scintillating, however unfounded, assessment of the nature of the relationship between Stuart and Morton. Stuart’s exploits needed no embellishment. Nonetheless, Mount’s fanciful biography is replete with wild suppositions presented under the guise of fact—Mount had little problem taking liberties with the subject of his study. One such provocative conjecture is his notion that the two friends and confidants were, in reality, lovers. Mount’s version of their association painted a picture of true (and consummated) love.

According to the author’s fabrication, for Stuart—a man whose reputation had not before been touched by the “scandal of boudoir intrigue”—and for Morton, from whom scandal was never far, “[l]ove awakened at midlife.” About their contrived poetic exchange, Mount posed this suggestive query: “How often have lovers’ words echoed the sentiments

here so lightly obscured by the pretext of a portrait?" The romanticized construction of the artist/sitter dynamic is a commonplace in the history of Western art—the *Pygmalion* tale being perhaps the most literal example—and the rarefied nature of that connection was certainly no less of a preoccupation in eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century theories of art. A Romantic construction premised on the idea of a male artist and female muse, the traditional formula does not wholly apply to the Stuart/Morton collaboration. Further, the imposition of the classical commonplace upon the complex friendship between the pair minimizes its authenticity, leading necessarily to shallow readings.

Nothing whatever about Stuart's and Morton's formulaic verse indicates a "lightly obscured" passion smoldering beneath the surface; still, others have speculated that the painter did in fact "slide into the lover." To make literal this metaphor invoked by contemporary British art critic William Hazlitt (1778-1830) was, in this instance, mere whimsy. No real evidence exists to suggest that Morton and Stuart had anything more than an intellectual affair. Their relationship was unique. Mount was right about that. He has even posited that Morton was Stuart's hand model, allowing him to "employ her long, slender, tapering hands in portraits" while she was in Philadelphia in 1802. If this were the case, then Morton can be placed in Stuart's studio with some regularity. The two would have spent more time together than her sittings required, presenting the opportunity to solidify their connection to one another as artist and muse but also as friends and confidants. Their poetic exchange in the *Port Folio* suggested that Stuart and Morton

viewed themselves as kindred spirits—a sensitivity that informs his three portraits of her while reinforcing the depth of their association.

As intimate and longtime friends, their relationship was more significant than that of patron and artist and well beyond casual acquaintances, as Evans has concluded. Evans nonetheless posits that Stuart “may have been infatuated with Morton while he wrote the poem.” To the contrary, the painter’s lines were not the work of a hapless suitor but rather a product of their moment and written according to established conventions for contemporary poetry about portraiture.

### **Knowing One’s Audience: The Boston Portrait of Mrs. M.**

Morton’s fascinating personal history contributes to the complex narrative surrounding the group of portraits as much as do the circumstances of their individual commissions and occasions of execution. On their surfaces, the three paintings are most obviously united through Stuart’s similar handling of Morton’s facial features. The original pose of Morton in each of the portraits is similar; however, the ultimate composition of each painting is singular. And while each image is unique, the group and the individual portraits are best understood when considered in the context of each other. In many ways, there is difficulty reading any one of the series without reference to the other two. The trio is connected as well through the nature of their interdependent commentary upon, between, and among each other. The portraits consistently reveal and conceal information regarding the life and work of the sitter as well as of the artist. At the same time, Stuart employs the



portraits of his friend to render a critical sketch of the many paradoxes of their historical moment.

In cursory viewing, the *Boston* and *Winterthur* portraits appear fairly consistent with the conventions of eighteenth-century female portraiture. Morton is depicted as a prosperous wife—wearing her wedding band and elegant gown—seated at her writing desk. Pen and inkwell distinguish her as an author. However, close inspection reveals that, like the *Worcester*, they too are unusual. And the *Winterthur* is exceptional—for art historians as well as for those interested in American cultural studies. A consideration of the commissioner of the portraits is also relevant for the full story of any one of the portraits to emerge. For instance, since it was painted by and for her family, the Boston version is the most traditional of the group. The *Winterthur*, by contrast, was painted for an admirer and presents a considerably more alluring Morton.

As the most straightforward of the group, the Boston oil on canvas serves as counterpoint to discussions regarding the Winterthur and Worcester renditions. The *Boston* portrait was likely intended, at least in part, to document Sarah Morton's likeness for her descendants and for posterity. Based on those criteria, the portrait is successful though not remarkable. On this occasion Stuart depicts his friend in a fairly conventional, and lovely, manner as an author and wife. With her hair pinned back modestly in a bun accented by tasteful ringlets curled round her face, Morton is attractive, if matronly. Her eyes are almond-shaped eyes, her faintly smiling lips a demure pink. But the darkened background

and his sitter's black costume lend a brooding air to the portrait—a painting that overall is marked by a somber weightiness not evident in his other two Morton portraits.

This vaguely morose depiction of Mrs. Morton does not have the air of contentedness that often characterizes eighteenth-century American and European portraits of married women of her class and position. Nor is this portrait typical of Stuart's female representations from this period. See, for example, his clear and brightly highlighted 1803 representation of Helena Holmes Pennington, the wife of a sugar merchant. Also executed during Stuart's time in Philadelphia, this portrait depicts a satisfied Pennington dressed in white and seated in an orange-red upholstered barrel-backed chair against a serene green background with yellow specks. Stuart's portrait of Mrs. Anne Bingham (1764-1801) makes an especially telling comparison, as she and Morton were close in age and were rivals for the title of foremost American salonniere. As he had with Morton, Stuart painted the socially progressive Bingham in a black gown trimmed in white lace and complemented by a stack of books. In this much lighter composition, Bingham is depicted seated in an exotic Chinese-red armchair against a soft mossy-green background. The colorfully gilded tomes at her red reading desk are references to her extensive travel—her finger marks a page in *Voyage en Syrie*. Even Stuart's portrait of Abigail Adams (begun around 1800), though taken when the First Lady was many years older than Morton, depicts her as more vivid and full of life than does the Boston portrait of Morton. Interestingly, though Stuart also painted Mr. Pennington, Mr. Bingham, and President Adams, he never painted Perez

Morton.

In the Boston painting, Stuart paints Morton seated in a deep-crimson upholstered armchair against a plain somber background. While its occupant looks forward directly at the viewer, the chair is positioned in profile, giving her an oddly uncomfortable position. This unnatural stance was typical for Stuart. Though it was not uncommon for a woman to be painted in a fetishistic manner while absorbed in the act of book reading—often in profile—and inwardly focused, Stuart does the reverse. He paints Morton not as if pausing to be admired as she reads but rather as an author and intellectual, with her hand resting atop a stack of impressive-looking bound books that she has presumably already absorbed. Stuart employs the tomes not, as was customary, to emblemize status, denote morality or spirituality, or highlight feminine accomplishments. Instead the volumes are evidence that Morton is well read and abreast of contemporary philosophical treatises. Perhaps the books also refer to the historical allusions in her own writings. The tools of Morton's trade, a pen and an inkwell—which were eighteenth-century emblems connoting authorship—rest on the desk in front of her.

Morton's costume is simple but rich. She wears a low-cut, though still modest, black dress with short sleeves trimmed in white tulle. Stuart had initially bejeweled her long neck with a double strand of pearls that he later painted out, opting instead for minimal ornamentation. A discreet red pin of ruby or garnet affixes lace to Morton's sleeve, and she wears a gold wedding band on her left hand. Morton's mournful expression and

overall dark mood distinguish this painting from Stuart's other contemporaneous portraits of republican wives and mothers—the darkness of the painting, perhaps, echoing the sadness in Morton's marriage. Within her trio of portraits, this sober treatment of Morton contrasts starkly with the complexity of the Winterthur composition as well as the luminosity of the Worcester rendering.

Significantly, Morton's external orientation distinguishes her as a producer and not merely a consumer of literature. A recurrent strain in contemporary philosophical writings, addressing both the arts and human character, delineated a sharp (while logically convoluted) contrast between *natural* masculine and feminine orientation in matters relating to the external/material world and to internal/intangible realms. Already deprived by nature of public reason, women were further constructed as innately incapable of introspection. In her essay "The choice of Hercules: the polite arts and 'female excellence' in eighteenth-century London," Charlotte Grant explores the gendered vocabulary of classical rhetoric regarding this perceived difference in approach between the sexes. Grant's deconstruction of British modes of female representation deals principally with the visual arts but is applicable to American constructs of femininity in the polite arts generally as well as to republican portraiture. Pointedly, Stuart emphasizes Morton's external orientation in each of his three portraits. In doing so, he implicitly reinforces Morton's capacity to reason and comment upon matters beyond the domestic arena while presenting her as a woman of ideas.

### **A Study in Scandal: The Winterthur Portrait of Mrs. M.**

While the specific dates and times of Morton's initial sittings with Stuart are unknown, she very likely sat for Stuart during the days of her dalliance with Gouverneur Morris, which lasted from the spring of 1800 to 1801. Mr. Morton traveled to Philadelphia in 1800 on behalf of a group of Boston proprietors of public lands in the Yazoo province of Georgia. He was selected to convey documents to President Jefferson, and his efforts resulted in a formal—and fruitless—petition to Congress in 1804. As legal counsel and emissary for the Bostonians, Morton also spent the winters of 1802-03 and 1803-04 in Washington, D.C. His wife accompanied him on the 1800 official visit to the capital city and on one or both of his other trips. The presence of Mr. and Mrs. Morton in Philadelphia during April 1800 is documented in a letter addressed to a nephew of Abigail Adams, William Smith Shaw. Additionally, Morris's meticulous and extensive diaries from the time of his affair with Mrs. Morton in the spring of that year confirm that she could have easily sat to Stuart at that time.

During those sittings with Stuart—doubtless an emotionally charged time for Morton—something transpired between painter and sitter that bound together the two of them for the rest of their lives. Morton may have confided in her portraitist the betrayal by Perez and the deep sadness that she always associated with the calumny. Perhaps she even shared her own scandalous amorous adventures with Stuart. Whatever the case, their view of one another as kindred spirits was born of these sessions. Of Stuart's three portraits, the

*Winterthur* portrait most palpably captures the romantic intrigue and potentially volatile consequences of his sitter's exploits. Clearly, the risk of discovery was one Morton was prepared to take. Stuart's portrait can be read as the artist's pictorial sanction of her transgressions.

As with the *Boston* painting, a consideration of audience is necessary when approaching the intriguing *Winterthur* panel portrait. The painting was commissioned by close Stuart associate Dunn whose own portrait would have been completed around the same time for the Irishman returned to Europe in 1802. Dunn likely took the *Winterthur* portrait home with him then suggesting that at least one of the Morton paintings was completed by that time. Stuart may have tailored the painting to his friend's tastes, emphasizing the qualities that Dunn found intriguing enough in Morton to pay for their painted preservation. Stuart did not usually respond well to suggestions from his clients; however, the possibility remains that the painter composed the piece according to Dunn's specifications. Stuart's painting expresses the volatility of Morton's personal life at that moment, but the artist further sketches his impression of the variety of life in the early American republic. The *Winterthur* portrait is rife with metaphor, satire, social criticism, and humor.

Stuart again portrays Morton accompanied by books on her desk and surrounded by tools of her trade. Indicating more than simply her education or identity as a "learned woman," the portrait shows Morton not as if interrupted in reverie while reading poetry or

as a woman of accomplishment but rather as a writer, a thinker. As was the case in the *Boston* portrait, the *Winterthur* features a pen and inkwells; however, for Dunn's commission, Stuart added manuscripts to the two books stacked upon her writing desk. With this inclusion, Stuart most pointedly identifies Morton as an author of original writings. The imposing tomes on her desk imply that the papers are not personal correspondence but instead a creative work-in-progress. In this portrait, Morton the muse is simultaneously Morton the creator.

Morton's gesture—her right hand is clasping a bracelet on her left wrist—and the configuration of her hands are unusual. Her second and third fingers appear to point toward the pearl strands circling her wrist. Was the bracelet a gift from Dunn? A token from her lover, Morris? With the inclusion of this potentially controversial detail, Stuart exercises an autobiographical impulse by in effect injecting himself—his knowledge of Morton's extramarital liaison—into the domestic conflict between husband and wife. Thus on one level, the *Winterthur* portrait can be read as Stuart's effort to advertise his ally Morton's revenge, in which case the joke is on Perez. Sarah Morton never mentioned the painter's impression of her husband. As no anecdotal evidence of Stuart's opinion of Perez Morton exists, his *Winterthur* portrait is the only means by which one might speculate on the matter. At the very least, it appears that Stuart had little respect for Mr. Morton, as he seems to have recorded for posterity a visual reminder of Sarah

Morton's retaliatory infidelity. Gouverneur Morris's bearing is said to have resembled that of the statuesque General Washington. French sculptor Houdon confirmed the likeness with his request that Morris serve as body double for his now-iconic bust of the president. Significantly, the same sculpture—commissioned in 1785 at the behest of Thomas Jefferson—makes a cameo in Stuart's Winterthur portrait of Morton.

In the *Winterthur* portrait, Stuart's jape can also be interpreted as at his own expense or, equally, as a jab at American artists on the whole. By painting in his deference to Houdon, whose head of Washington he greatly admired, Stuart toys with the conventional painterly device of feigned humility employed by so many of his contemporaries. At the same time, though, the painting is also exemplary of Stuart's disdain for authority and forced nationalistic symbology. Stuart did not engage in the, largely British and later French, convention of quoting from ancient mythology. Instead, whether consciously or unconsciously, he helped to invent a distinctively American mythology through his portraiture.

More than any man in the republic, Washington attracted hero worship—an iconographic status that Stuart himself was partly responsible for creating. The great general's sculpted head hovers almost Zeus-like above Morton's shoulder, the mythical Washington presiding over the canvas in the bemused manner of a Greek or Roman god. Stuart's painted surface is also rich with multilayered allusions to human foibles and their earthly imperfections



such as infidelity, jealousy, and revenge. According to this interpretation, then, Washington is literally whispering in the ear of the author—as if he is the voice of the classical muse. Morton was inspired to compose some of her most successful poetry by Washington’s earthly inspiration. In the inscribed copy of “Beacon Hill” that was personally presented to the President by Dunn, Morton acknowledged Washington as the motivating force behind her verse. Her hand-written, rather extravagant, sentiment read, “To George Washington—A Name Honored in History—Loved by the Muses—and immortal as Memory—The following Poem, originated by Enthusiasm, is presented with Diffidence from The Author.” What is more, Washington operates as muse within a muse and, further, as a work of art within another work of art. After all, Washington was muse to both Houdon for his lauded bust and to Stuart in the Athenaeum and again in this *Winterthur* portrait of Morton.

Alternatively, the appearance of the republic’s first president in this rendering of Morton can be interpreted more broadly. Indeed, the painting in its entirety can be interpreted as more than a traditional portrait; it can be seen as a sort of American allegorical work through which Stuart comments on the progress of the young nation. In this construction, Washington’s visage is perhaps representative of the primordial voice of republican moral authority, registering disappointment with the state of national public affairs. Washington’s revered and—as painted by Stuart—vaguely disapproving countenance conveys the common belief in the deleterious escalation of vanity and luxury

to which the culture had succumbed. Stuart would have been fully aware of those social criticisms, as they were routinely leveled at portraiture itself. Self-important sitters and social-climbing aspirants to painted fame were cited as prime examples of that very alarming dissipation and self-absorption. This was just the sort of association in which the irreverent Stuart delighted, and it provides a fertile context through which to engage with this complex painting. Pointedly, Stuart comments via the genre of portraiture itself—a solipsism that characterized the clever painter's verbal and visual practices. In this way the Winterthur composition depicts the hypocrisy of the republican culture of virtue that was rapidly becoming both irrelevant and, for Stuart, perhaps ridiculous.

Alternatively, the prominence of the republic's first president may be viewed as the primordial voice of American moral authority, perhaps registering disappointment with the state of national public affairs. Following this construction, Washington's revered, and disapproving, visage reflects the perception of the deleterious escalation in vanity and luxury to which the culture had succumbed. Stuart would have been fully aware of those social criticisms, as they were routinely leveled at portraiture itself. Self-important sitters and social-climbing aspirants to painted fame were cited as prime examples of that very alarming dissipation and self-absorption. This was just the sort of association in which the irreverent Stuart delighted, and it provides a fertile context through which to engage with this complex painting. Pointedly, Stuart comments via the portraiture genre itself—a solipsism that characterized the clever painter's verbal and visual practices. His Winterthur

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**“The Lines of Reason,” “The Lines of Grace”: The Worcester Portrait of an American Woman of Ideas**

Stuart’s paintings of Morton culminate in the provocative *Worcester* portrait—a painting that, once begun, the artist may have continued to work on for many years. Like Morton, herself, this portrait is a work-in-progress to which, I suggest, Stuart had a special attachment. Certain faces seemed to have aroused more interest than others for the temperamental portraitist, who, when thus entranced, created his most inspired work. The *Worcester* portrait of Morton is one such masterful piece. Diverging significantly from the other two portraits, this early Romantic representation can be interpreted as the artist’s depiction of the poet as creative genius, again confirming the connection between the two as like-minded souls. In this never finished portrait, Morton’s veiled head is a visual manifestation of the sitter “in a shroud of thoughts which were not their thoughts.” Her highly unusual gesture—her arms raised as if adjusting the sheer sketched-in veil that covers her highly finished head—instantly distinguishes the portrait from the many contemporary depictions of women with their hands folded dutifully in their laps. When

the three Morton portraits are placed side by side, the evanescent quality of the *Worcester* painting most visibly distinguishes it from the other two, which, by comparison, are fairly dark and heavy in aspect.

On the whole, when art historians have written about the *Worcester* portrait, they almost always interpret her gesture literally. Most early Stuart scholarship presumes this spontaneity of pose; however, more recent, and ostensibly more rigorous, scholars have also accepted this explanation, leading to a superficial treatment of the portrait. It is important to point out that Morton's gesture was not the pose that Stuart had originally intended. At some point, the artist painted over his canvas though he did not conceal the more traditional underlying pose, in which the sitters' arms are crossed at the wrists resting on her lap. Additionally, Stuart appears to have initially applied darker paint as an undercoat suggesting the possibility that the *Worcester* painting had, at one time, possessed as somber a mood as that characterizing the *Boston* and *Winterthur* portraits.

Stuart's paintings typically express *character*, an identity well formed regardless of gender. And in the case of the Worcester painting of Mrs. Morton, the painting bespeaks a faint fragility arising from a life richly, if not always happily, lived. Morton's mind—her character—was as compelling to Stuart as was her beautiful face. Unlike depictions of most women of her era, Morton's eyes are not cast downward in the task of arranging flowers or laboring over the intricacies of needlework. Ellen Miles calls the painting a work of “extraordinary spontaneity and passion, conveying the illusion of motion and an aspect

of sensuality rarely seen in portraits of the period.” Mirroring the dynamism of the pose, the relationship between muse and artist is a metaphorical one that transcends the bounds of space and time. Stuart paints Morton in an almost exotic fashion—though not in the character of a Turkish exotique or as a mythological goddess or traditional muse. His choice of backgrounds adds to the moodiness. Luminous clouds and clear blue sky occupy the upper-left portion of the canvas while the right side is dark and mysterious. The illusory sense evoked through the ambiguity of her movement heightens the ephemeral overall effect of this provocative version of Stuart’s muse. In this rather mystical rendering of Morton, Stuart does not locate her temporally or geographically. Her floating, disembodied head gives the viewer no clues to her identity: *she is among them but not of them*.

Stuart gave Morton unconventional attire as well. Though her garment is incomplete, the artist had blocked in the outline using whites and grays. The viewer can just make out a broadly painted white high-waisted rather transparent-looking gown. Stuart painted Morton’s sheer veil in a similar manner. Her hair is in a loose bun with ringlets falling in a Grecian-style at her forehead. Morton’s neckline scoops and vague lace or ruffles are visible—slightly impasto in style—but the neckline is not plunging as in the *Winterthur* painting. Around her neck, a simple strand of graduated pearls that do not appear to completely encircle her long neck.

Stuart did not paint Morton as the experienced and frequently published author as

he did in the *Winterthur* and *Boston* portraits, nor as a devoted wife and mother. Rather than adhering to generic types or convention, in this painting Stuart renders a complex woman with a unique set of personal, social, and cultural experiences at a unique period in time. The end product suggests a collaboration between the two over time to create a vision that both were active in and intent upon conveying. Provocatively, Morton appears to be standing—a stance which though not unheard of in female portraiture is more conventional in paintings of men. She is depicted as upright in a three-quarter pose lifting a white veil away from her face, exposing herself to the viewer in a manner that is at once sensually and intellectually aggressive, almost daring the viewer to judge her. Her pose can be seen as symbolic of concealment, but it can as easily be interpreted as a revelation or unveiling—her direct gaze enhances this disarming effect. Looking out at the viewer, her eyes confront in an almost challenging fashion, as if daring the viewer to look back. The importance of Morton’s posture cannot be overestimated, for some eighteenth-century women were too modest to even sit for their portraits.

After Stuart’s move to Boston, Morton may have sat for him whenever she liked—with his muse so close at hand, he could have revisited the *Worcester* portrait at his leisure. For many years, Morton called on Stuart at his Boston painting rooms, where Stuart had begun a portrait of her beloved daughter, Charlotte, in 1808; this daughter, who was described as “resemble[ing] her mother in character and charm,” died eleven years later. Like her mother as depicted in the Worcester portrait and whom she physically mirrored, Stuart originally

painted Charlotte in a white dress. Morton joined her daughter for her sittings with Stuart, suggesting the possibility that perhaps they occasioned the artist's changing of Morton's pose and costume. Perhaps Stuart envisioned a mother-daughter pair of portraits—he was evidently quite fond of Charlotte. In a letter that year from Sarah Cunningham, another of Morton's daughters, she recounted Stuart's recollection of her deceased sister as an “angel” who “passed so nobly through the miserable world.” Mrs. Morton and Sarah often came to visit their lost loved one via her portrait in Stuart's studio—a painting that Stuart kept in his possession until as late as 1825. Stuart was commissioned around 1808 to paint companion portraits to commemorate the nuptials of Charlotte and prominent Rhode Islander, Andrew Dexter—a common eighteenth and nineteenth-century practice. Charlotte Dexter's portrait, like her mother's, remained unfinished, though the younger woman's portrait was later completed by Thomas Sully. Stuart's portraits of Charlotte and Morton's both possess angelic attributes; in addition to their white gowns, they are depicted as surrounded by heavenly clouds. The heavens were also the seats of the muses of classical mythology.

Stuart's *Worcester* portrait of Morton explores the painter-muse dynamic most fully, making it one of the finest examples of his genius, and embodies the connection among painter, sitter, poetry, and art in the late-eighteenth-century imagination. In both Europe and America, the Neoclassical revival was characterized by a fascination with all things Greco-Roman. The ancient muses, who appear in both Greek and Roman

mythology, were unmarried and, in most constructions, virgins. Morton was about forty-two years old when she first sat for Stuart, and though still considered a beauty, she was hardly a maiden.

Recent scholarship has suggested that the Worcester version is the original; in conjunction with the 2004 Stuart retrospective, co-curators Carrie Rebora-Barratt and Ellen G. Miles contend that the less-finished Worcester head is “closely related to the two completed portraits and is very likely to be the original life portrait.” Stuart may have quickly sketched Morton’s face during their Germantown sittings and employed that image as a model painting the more-complete commissioned *Boston* and *Winterthur* portraits. Accepting that the Worcester version is the original however does not eliminate the possibility that Stuart continued to re-work the painting as his friendship with Morton developed, as I believe was the case. And compared to the other renditions, this portrait does have a more lifelike effect. From all accounts, this likeness was considered by Morton intimates to best embody the woman herself. Morton appears almost to breathe on the canvas—a feature of Stuart’s portraiture that the poet herself acknowledged in verse: “’Tis *character* that breathes, ’tis soul that twines/Round the rich canvass[sic], traced in living lines.”

Stuart did not relinquish his treasured Worcester head of Morton until death required him to. Discovered in his studio when he died in 1828, the Worcester portrait has acquired a mysterious patina over the years. One account asserts that the canvas was not



merely chanced upon in his studio but “found upon Stuart’s easel” at his death, as if the artist were reflecting upon or possibly revisiting his muse. Today the painting hangs as it was found in 1828, in its original gilded frame, suggesting that the artist finally considered the portrait a finished piece. Curators at the Worcester Art Museum suggest that the frame may be the work of Boston cabinetmaker, carver, and gilder John Doggett (1780-1857). That Doggett was a Boston resident implies that Stuart did not frame the painting until some time after his move to that city in 1805 and supports the possibility that the artist continued to work on the piece once there. As if to reinforce Morton’s status as both classical muse and a woman of ideas, Stuart selected an ornamental frame featuring carved acanthus and laurel leaves—both emblems, dating from antiquity, symbolizing creative achievement and immortality through the arts.

Many plausible explanations for Stuart’s attachment to the piece present themselves. Perhaps Stuart held on to this Morton painting simply because he may have painted it for himself. And hers was not the only unfinished canvas that Stuart left in his wake. As attested by Thomas Sully, one of Stuart’s many protégés, he often lost interest once he completed the faces of his sitters. However, Sully also pointed out that when Stuart “liked a picture, he hated to give it up.” The mercurial painter frequently did not finish paintings and gave a variety of explanations—some more plausible than others. We know this was the case with his famous head of Washington, though he likely kept that picture for copying purposes rather than for any personal attachment. In addition to the Dunn and Morton

portraits, and the image of George Washington that is inexorably imprinted on the collective American imagination, eight “unfinished sketches of heads” were discovered in Stuart’s studio at his death. These sketches are mentioned in the inventory of Stuart’s estate, recorded just after he died in 1828. Among the few objects of value that the painter had not relinquished was a piercing rendering of orator and jurist Daniel Webster (1782-1852) as well as an evocative head of Romantic painter Washington Allston (1779-1843), both dating from the period that Stuart is known to have been living in Boston.

Aside from his head of Washington, Morton’s and Dunn’s are the only remaining portraits that date to Stuart’s days in Philadelphia. Notably, Morton is the only woman in the impressive lot. The designs of the idiosyncratic painter are, of course, irretrievable; however, it was surely no accident that Stuart retained possession of the singular *Worcester* portrait. Further, the provocative possibility that the painting was discovered “upon his easel” at his death—true or not—merits informed conjecture on the matter of the artist’s motivation.

Stuart achieves this unusual characterization through a variety of devices, including his emphatic brushwork, the portrait’s vertically moving composition, Morton’s unusual costume and gesture and her challenging gaze. The unfinished appearance of this extraordinary painting, the *non finito*, invites audience participation and encourages viewers to complete the portrait on their own. Highly unusual in composition and in execution, the *Worcester* portrait—the most unconventional of the three—can be read as a subtle

commentary on the hypocrisy of the period that simultaneously promoted freedom for all while denying women access to pursue a life in the public sphere. Though Stuart confronted this inherent paradox of republican ideology in his first two Morton portraits as well, this emphasis culminates in the seemingly unfinished version that he so treasured.

## **Conclusion**

### **Who's Musing Whom?: The Sister Arts of Poetry and Painting in the Work of Morton and Stuart**

In America's democratic republic, as in the Roman republic almost two thousand years earlier, the complementary arts of painting and poetry were considered to be siblings of sorts. The Neoclassical revival, in both Europe and America, was characterized by a fascination with all things Greco-Roman. Classical antiquity handed down the idea of the muses, or sister graces, who were related as descendants of the divine in mythology. Conceptualized as female beauties, the muse figures were considered the wellspring of artistic inspiration. Each of the nine muses symbolized a specific genre of art, from music and painting to lyrical poetry. During the eighteenth-century, a literal cult surrounding the muse figure developed among by Enlightenment thinkers, their acolytes constructed shrines—often located near water or containing a fountain—in their honor to advance knowledge and civic harmony. In France, many influential figures even endeavored to reinvigorate a “Cult of the Muses,” among them Benjamin Franklin and Voltaire. In accordance with the conventions of classical poetry, as was the spirit of the times, American artists of all sorts regularly held converse with a muse for inspiration.

As forms of expression, the arts of poetry and painting particularly share a complementary heritage in the history of western literature and art. The practice of lyrically comparing the two “sister graces” was commonplace in Europe. By the 1700s, following the British precedent, references to the link between the two genres was a commonplace in

American popular culture. Jessie Poesch's essay on colonial poetry about art, "In Just Lines to Trace," accounts for the affinity between the two genres' practitioners as a "shared feeling for imagery." American poets and artists participated in the mutually beneficial practice, and republican publishers eagerly printed their work. This was a time in American history when writers frequently wrote poems about painters and their works and when visual artists regularly took writers as their subjects.

Eighteenth-century poetry about art was composed either as a tribute to the painter or in honor of a particular work, or works, of art and followed a well-established formula. Portraits that were rarely available for viewing outside of a patron's home could nevertheless be made familiar through their poetic descriptions. Significantly, Poesch points out the public function that such verse performed when published in the local or more widely circulated newspapers by bringing attention to the talent and services of the artists and the prestige of the patrons, bringing both parties public recognition. With the publication of art-inspired verse, the talent and prestige of the artist as well as the power and position of the sitter were publicly validated and widely-read. The very fact that a portrait had garnered public literary and critical attention conferred credibility upon painter and sitter alike.

Morton and Stuart's poetic exchange from *Port Folio*, adhered to convention—their poems expounded upon the similarity of the roles of the arts while bringing both of their work to the public's attention. The preoccupation with the mythical muse construction is

reflected in Stuart's Worcester portrait of Morton as well as in the writings of both painter and poet. Further, the careers and relationship of Stuart and Morton were living testaments of the interdependence among the two sister graces.

Stuart operated in close proximity to poets. And from childhood, Morton had both a familiarity with and an interest in the painterly arts as well as connections with many artists and with her prestigious social circle, members of which were often the faces on display. Morton also successfully navigated the position of the muse; as a beautiful and talented woman, she was a source of inspiration, a muse, for many male poets and for Gilbert Stuart. As a poet herself, this "Tenth Muse" was both muse and creator—at once feminine inspiration and self-fashioned androgynous author.

Like Stuart, who was so fascinated with Morton he painted his muse three times, Morton had an enduring poetic interest in Stuart, who was featured in a variety of Morton's poems and in at least one essay. Of Morton's work featuring Stuart, some selections were published at the time of their composition, whereas others appeared to have been circulated in manuscript form. Joseph Dennie printed at least one additional poem by Morton, in 1807, in which she took the artist as her subject. Though published unsigned, "Lines, On Seeing the portrait of a lady, recently taken by Mr. Stuart," is surely from Morton's hand. *My Mind and its Thoughts* contains six writings involving Stuart. In her undated verse "To Mr. Stuart solicited by his Friend to give his own Portrait," Morton lauded his talent and encouraged Stuart to preserve his own image on canvas. In accordance with classical

convention, she dedicated verse to Stuart as an artist and wrote tributes to several of his individual portraits. The latter was particularly the case when the portrait depicted one of the many friends the two had in common. Upon Stuart's arrival in Boston Morton was surely influential in securing commissions for him from among her influential social network. Though unparalleled as a portraitist, Stuart nevertheless valued Morton as an ally, since potential patrons were at times put off by his unpredictability.

The amount of Morton's work that is Stuart-related underscores the intensity of their connection. Serving as mutual muses, they shared a pure creative alliance until old age. Her poetical accompaniments to his paintings enhanced his reputation in the public eye, as they flattered artist and sitter alike. For the sometimes-insecure Stuart, her praise was probably therapeutic. As for Morton, in her verse she elevated herself to the status of art critic, assuming an authorial position of a cultivated woman of ideas who was conversant in discourses on art. For example, her "Inscription for the portrait of Fisher Ames, painted con Amore, by Stuart" as well as "Stanzas to Gilbert Stuart, on his intended portrait of Mrs. H. the beautiful wife of one of the naval heroes" reveal her confidence writing about the visual arts. She praised Stuart as she bolstered the legacy of their mutual associate, Professor McKean, in her tributary "Stanzas upon seeing an imperfect sketch designed from memory, for the powerful features of the late and ever lamented Professor McKean." Stuart also made an appearance in one of Morton's essays. Her "On Civility" refers to a "Mr. S.," whom she described as a revered painter.

Of course, the verses most identified with both Stuart and, increasingly, Morton were their pendant poems featured in *Port Folio* in 1803. While the pair of poems by Stuart and Morton is generally associated with the Worcester canvas, in all probability the exchange of verse was likely prompted by the completion of the Winterthur panel. Clues in the poems themselves and in “Samuel Saunter’s” introduction—as well as in Morton’s later writings—suggest that the panel portrait was the inspiration for Morton and Stuart, their lines illuminating the question of the order of execution of the three paintings.

Their published exchange was printed in June 1803, making it clear that Stuart had completed at least one Morton portrait by that following summer. Morton’s later writings lend credence to this conclusion as well. When *My Mind and Its Thoughts* was published in 1823, Morton had revamped some of her previously published work—the *Port Folio* poem to Stuart contained a few minor revisions, among them the title of the poem. The original title read simply “To Mr. Stuart on His Portrait of Mrs. M”; her updated title was significantly more specific: “To Mr. Stuart, Upon Seeing Those Portraits Which Were Painted by Him at Philadelphia, in the Beginning of the Present Century.” The plural “[P]ortraits” leaves no doubt that more than one of the trio originated “at Philadelphia” prior to Stuart’s move to Boston in 1805.

Morton’s concluding lines to her companion Stuart expressed her wish that he never be deprived of inspiration, that the “friend of Genius” would remain his friend. The two kindred spirits stayed in contact from the time of their first meeting in 1800 until as late



as 1825, when Morton visited the artist at his Boston painting-rooms. And as long as they were near, each had a beloved muse close at hand. Though Morton and Stuart were intimate companions, theirs was not an affair of the heart but rather an affair of the mind and soul, to borrow from the contemporary vernacular. But though they were likely not lovers, neither were they mere casual acquaintances involved in a commercial exchange of money for painting, as others have concluded.

The depth of their friendship is underscored by the prominent positioning of Morton's portrait in Stuart's studio upon his death. Perhaps Stuart preserved the precious portrait out of sentiment—a token of their momentous first meetings in Philadelphia. And, ultimately, as their affection deepened with time, Stuart may have clung to this first portrait of an American woman of ideas as a talisman to assist his future success. In Stuart's poem, he attributed his portrait of Morton to divine inspiration, pronouncing, "'twas heaven that bade the swift idea rise." The painter continued by comparing his portrait with the "works of the Almighty." In so doing, Stuart added another dimension to the Morton's role as muse—she inspired him not only to paint her image three times but, also, to write his only known verse. Stuart's poem "To Mrs. M." betrays both his desire for Morton's approval and the heartening effect it had on his temperament. He writes of the "cheering influence" she had on his always rather restless heart and how her "blest reflection" "soothe[d] his breast." Stuart also notes the weight that her validation had in diminishing the criticism of others: "M—n commends—and this alike outweighs/The *vulgars' censure*, or the *vulgar's*

*praise.*” Stuart’s closing lines underscore their interdependence while reinforcing the true depth of their affiliation: “Enough for me, that *she* extends her meed/Whose approbation is applause indeed.” Stuart needed Morton, and she him. As a consequence of this connection, Stuart painted one of the most complex and alluring female portraits of his era. He kept it close to him until the very end.

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Though their verse is quoted but briefly here, I will return to the public poetic exchange between Morton and Stuart throughout this study.

Housed at the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts, the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, respectively.

From an Adams letter to Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past from the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 83.

<sup>6</sup> The once-majestic Georgian-style residence—later well known as “Taylor House” or “Taylor Pavilion”—is no longer standing. Called “Morton Pavilion” during the family’s time there, the estate was situated in the affluent Dudley Triangle area of suburban Dorchester, which in the mid-eighteenth century had become an enclave for fashionable Bostonians seeking refuge from city life. See *Belknaps’ Boston* and William Dana Orcutt, *Good Old Dorchester: A Narrative History of the Town, 1630-1893* (Cambridge, 1893).

Though I agree with his characterization of Morton’s celebrity, I part ways with Shields’ representation of Morton’s practice and style as an intellectual. In his work on salon culture, Shields asserts, with little documentation, that Morton’s “coterie followed the bluestocking model.” I take his comment to mean that Morton was more British than French in her approach to salon society, that she was more interested in practical social reform than the lofty intellectual discussions about art, politics, and culture that characterized the French salon model. David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters of British North America* (Chapel Hill: University of N. Carolina Press, 1997), 311.

See William Dunlap’s biographical sketch of Stuart in his *The Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: George C. Scott and Company, printers, 1834). See also the writings of artist Matthew Harris Jouett, who, while studying with Stuart for four months in 1816, feverishly took notes during their time together, jotting down observations about the elder artist’s methodology and direct quotations from Stuart regarding his approach to portraiture; and John Hill Morgan’s *Gilbert Stuart and His Pupils: Together with the Complete Notes on Painting by Matthew Jouett Harris from Conversations with Gilbert Stuart in 1816* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1939).

See again Dunlap and Jouett’s notes from Morgan.

Vietto, *Women and Authorship in Revolutionary America* (Ashgate Publishing Co.: Burlington, Vermont, 2006), 6.

For a concise analysis of the “separate spheres” ideology, see Linda Kerber’s article “Separate Spheres, Female World, Women’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History*, 75, 1989, 9-39. Kerber emphasizes that the concept was never a literally accurate depiction of republican life but instead a constantly shifting, highly contested rhetorical construction.

For nice reproductions of the Worcester portrait and the fairly standardized descriptions of the piece, see Rebora Barratt and Miles’ *Gilbert Stuart* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005) 223-227; Dorinda Evans *The Genius of Gilbert Stuart* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 110-111; and Richard McLanathan’s *Gilbert Stuart* (New York: Harry N. Abrams with the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1986), 108-114.

For more on the connection between American poetry and painting during the era, see Jessie Poesch’s essay “In Just Lines to Trace—The Colonial Artist, 1700-1776,” *The Portrait in Eighteenth-Century America*. Ellen Miles, ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 37-61.

James Thomas Flexner, *On Desperate Seas: A Biography of Gilbert Stuart*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1995), reprint edition of original 1955 publication. While this page-turner is rich in riveting tales of Stuart’s dramatic exploits, the largely anecdotal book is comparatively poor in documentation. Many later scholars built upon Flexner’s discussion of Stuart and his emphasis on character. See for example, Richard McLanathan and Dorinda Evans.

Janis Bergman-Carton, *The Woman of Ideas in French Art, 1830-1848*. (New Haven: Yale Univ.

Press, 1995), 1. In this impeccably researched study, Bergman-Carton points out that the typology of the woman of ideas in nineteenth-century France often had derogatory implications—a result of the term’s historical association with controversial (and sexually liberal) figures like Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764), with notorious salonnière Madeleine de Scudery (1607-1701), and later with the influential Germaine de Stael (1766-1817), whose chateau at Coppet was referred to as “the salon of Europe.” This infamous quality was slightly less true of the salons of republican America. However, Morton’s scandalous personal history fits neatly into the model.

The term “woman of accomplishments” is a modern construction. I employ the useful categorization with this realization in mind.

Implicit in this pedagogical posture is that women are motivated to learn for performative purposes, whereas men seek knowledge for knowledge itself. This construction casts into sharp relief, then, the “unnatural” woman of ideas. The oppositional nature of these two modes of female presentations is developed throughout this study.

James Morton Smith first used the term *republic of letters* to characterize the era in his *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 1776-1820*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995). The correlation between the public written word and the American Revolution has often been noted. See Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) and Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Knopf, 1958).

Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). Building upon Jurgen Habermas’s pivotal 1962 work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Warner analyzes the history of American print culture, suggesting that a new sort of reading public emerged during the republican era—a condition necessary for America’s development into a “republic of letters”—and, further, that this new *public* greatly contributed to the national governmental structure and ideals of nationhood. Throughout my study, the term *public sphere* is premised upon these fundamental constructs.

William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy: Or, the Triumph of Nature, Founded in Truth* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Co., 1789). One of the numerous subplots (Letters XXI-XXIII) is a seduction story that almost literally parallels the Morton-Apthorp affair. Brown was a childhood friend and neighbor of Sarah Morton (then Apthorp) who would have had insider knowledge about the scandal. As a result, the novel’s publication stung her doubly.

For more on Stuart’s visual puns, see Susan Rather, “Stuart and Reynolds: A Portrait of Challenge,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 27, Fall (1993): 95-100. Rather looks at Stuart’s 1784 likeness of Sir Joshua Reynolds, then president of London’s Royal Academy of Arts, suggesting that the American’s depiction of the eminent artist had a subversive intent. By rendering Reynolds in a naturalistic manner—that is, as he actually appeared—Stuart painted a criticism of the generality that characterized the Grand Manner style promoted by Reynolds and the Academy.

Morton, “Rustic Lines, upon returning to the beloved hamlet of Dorchester,” *My Mind and Its Thoughts, in sketches, fragments, and essays* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1823). This highly personal compilation of poetry and prose was published under the name Sarah Wentworth Morton. I will refer to this collection as *MMIT* throughout this study. The list of subscribers included John Adams, “late President of the United States,” “His Excellency John Brooks, Governor of Massachusetts,” her dear friend and neighbor, socialite Hepzibah Swan, and “Hon. Harrison G. Otis,” 294.

For the only biography of Sarah Morton, see Emily Pendleton and Milton Ellis, *Philenia, the Life and Works of Sarah Wentworth Morton 1759-1846*, *The Maine Bulletin*, University of Maine Studies, second series, no. 20 (Orono, Maine: 1931). Although interest in Morton’s writing has recently increased—perhaps a result of the great interest of art historians in the Stuart portraits of her—this biography is still the definitive text on Morton. Most of the references I will make to Morton’s personal history are drawn from this publication or have been gleaned from her writing, unless otherwise noted. I will refer to the source as *Philenia* throughout this study.

Considered by the Greeks their greatest lyric poet, Sappho lived and wrote in the sixth century,

and, like Morton's, her life and memory have been marked by gossip and scandal. The first description of Morton as "The American Sappho" appeared in the Dec. 1791 issue of the *Massachusetts Magazine* in an article written by one of her most devoted young protégés. In this case, Robert Treat Paine, Jr. (1773-1811), christened *her* with a new name—a gesture of public renaming. Much her junior, Paine dedicated several poems to his muse, Morton, in which he praised her intellect, charm, and craftsmanship (perhaps too excessively); see *Philenia*, 47-8.

This was not the case even seven or eight years ago. Morton's poetry and plays are currently offered in American literature and poetry survey courses at Bentley College, Georgetown University, and the University of Virginia, among others. I even found an "I Love Sarah Wentworth Morton" t-shirt selling online for \$24.95.

Morton, like Stuart, played an active part in helping to fashion the iconic ideals that form the foundation of American national identity. The young Paine, for one, always recognized what he considered Morton's munificence to the revolutionary cause. While still an undergraduate at Harvard in 1797, Paine read his poem, "The Ruling Passion," before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, calling her the "great historian of the revolution," *Philenia*, 46-7. Fellow female author Mercy Otis Warren—whose incredibly detailed 1805 *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution, interspersed with biographical, political, and moral observations* marked the high point of her literary career—would likely have disagreed. The motivations of Paine—who was influential in building Morton's reputation as a woman of letters—remain unclear; a notorious drunk often in search of patronage, he may have been trying to curry favor with Morton and her wealthy and well-connected social circle; see *Philenia*, 46-7.

Settled in 1630—just one month before neighboring Boston—the residential community of Dorchester was, during the years of the republic, a posh suburb of the city. Presumably, she wrote this poem after having been away from her beloved estate for some time; the poem had not been published prior to the release of *MMIT* in 1823. And though early she clearly adored the home that she shared with her husband, I find it significant that almost immediately upon his death, Morton left Dorchester for the Braintree house where she had lived as a child (then within the township of Quincy). She died there, in her ancestral home, about ten years later, in 1846.

*MMIT*, 1.

In addition to the well-publicized Morton-Apthorp scandal, Morton's life was marked by a series of tragedies, among them the death of her youngest daughter, Charlotte, who died in 1819 at an early age shortly after her marriage to prominent Rhode Islander Andrew Dexter. Notably, Charlotte and Andrew sat for Gilbert Stuart to commemorate their wedding. One son died in his teens, another before he lived a full day. Morton's poem "Memento, for my infant who lived but eighteen hours" is a memorial to him. *MMIT*, 287-88.

For examples of Morton's verse regarding her felicitous youth, see "Lines to the Scion of the Tulip Tree, shading the rural home of my ancestors" and "Simple address to my home," both from *MMIT*, 133-34.

See Records of King's Chapel Baptisms, 1703-1824, Old Court House, Boston. In almost every account of Morton's personal history, her birthplace is erroneously assumed to be Braintree.

See *MMIT* regarding her poem "To the Mansion of My Ancestors, on seeing it occupied as a Banking Establishment," note (1), 271. This work—among those not published until 1823 in *MMIT*—referred to the 1796 sale and remodeling of Apthorp Mansion into the Union Bank. Perez Morton commissioned Sarah's cousin, architect Charles Bulfinch, to redesign and subsequently sell her family home—an act for which she never forgave her husband. Nor did she forget the humiliation of being forced to reside in the apartments above the Union Bank's offices while their grandiose Bulfinch-designed home in Dorchester was under construction. I will return to this verse in a later section.

Grizell Eastwick Apthorp was the daughter of John Eastwick and wife Grizell; Grizell Eastwicke which spelling is correct?, Morton's great-great grandmother, was the daughter of James Lloyd of Boston, who was the son of Sir John Lloyd of Kent. Sir Lloyd had assisted in carrying King Charles II to France after the 1651 Battle of Worcester—the final battle of the English Civil War. See the *Wentworth*



*Genealogy: English and American*, by John Wentworth, L.L.D. in three volumes (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1878), vol. 1, 519.

*Gazette*, Nov. 11, 1758.

East Apthorp (d. 1713) of Wales married Susan Ward (Morton's great-great grandmother, d. 1714), the daughter of the Reverend Dr. Ward of the Church of England. Related to the noble Wards of Boxeley, Susan Ward was a "celebrated beauty with a large fortune"; see *Philenia*, 13. Notably, Ward's portrait was painted by seventeenth-century British portraitist Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680). Lely was the principal painter to Charles II and eventually knighted in 1680. The portrait hung in Apthorp Mansion during Morton's childhood. See the *Wentworth Genealogy*, vol. 1, 519.

Another of Wentworth's kinsmen, Sir John Wentworth (1696-?), baronet, was the last royal governor of the province of New Hampshire. See Morton's long nationalistic poem *Beacon Hill A Local Poem, Historic and Descriptive, Book 1* (Boston: Manning, 1797), 26-7, 54.

See "Invocation to the shades of my ancestors, Wentworth and Apthorp," *MMIT*, 267; this poem is quoted later in the chapter. See also her extensive annotations from *MMIT*, page 30; here she described the Apthorp shield of arms as "bearing a mullet or spur, in heraldry, with truly Welsh prepossession" while acknowledging that the family was "fondly, *perhaps* foolishly, wont to trace back to the Crusades," n. (3), 271.

*MMIT*, n.1, 271.

See John W. Wentworth, *The Wentworth Genealogy: English and American*, 3 vols. (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1878), vol. I., 519.

See *Charles Apthorp* (c.1748), now housed at the Cleveland Museum of Art. The Feke portrait of their married daughter, *Mrs. Trecothick*, was also painted at this time.

See Blackburn's *Governor Benning Wentworth* (1760) and *Lieutenant Governor John Wentworth* (176x), both housed at the New Hampshire Historical Society in Concord. As an itinerant painter, Blackburn divided his time among Boston, Portsmouth, and Newport.

Margaretta M. Lovell, *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 8.

*MMIT*, 30. Morton's lengthy and numerous endnotes regarding the inspiration for this poem are telling. Her endnotes recount that "*then*, that is about the middle of the eighteenth century," [the home] was "said to be the scene of every elegance, and the abode of every virtue. *Now*, its beautiful hall . . . the grand stair-case, and its highly finished saloon [sic], have been removed, or partitioned off, to accommodate the bank and its dependencies" (her italics), from notes, 271.

No legal measures were ever taken against James Apthorp; however, his name was presented at a town meeting by the selectmen of Braintree. On June 9, 1777, Apthorp was among a list of persons

"esteemed to be Inimical [sic] to the cause of the colonies." See Hon. Wentworth, John. *The Wentworth Genealogy: English and American* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1878), v. 1.

Bernard Bailyn discusses the well-publicized conflict in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); the episode reached its zenith in 1763, when Jonathan Mayhew wrote the Archbishop of Canterbury that New Englanders would not tolerate the arbitrary "establish[ment] of a tyranny over the bodies and souls of men." Bailyn elucidates this controversy as exemplary of the "latent fear among nonconformists through all of colonial history" that their liberty was constantly being threatened by the Anglican church, 96-7.

James Apthorp's perceived Toryism and temporary ostracism from his neighbors may account for

the paucity of references to him in local records from the period.

A letter located in the curatorial file for Stuart's *Worcester* portrait of Morton supports her acumen for foreign languages while also offering a clue about her posture as salonniere. Written by Morton's great-great-great-granddaughter, Mrs. Thomas B. (Venetian S.) Gale of Portland, Maine, the letter of June 10, 1925, is addressed to the museum's secretary, Mr. Benjamin H. Stone. In a gesture that would likely have deeply offended Morton's sensibilities, Gale endeavored to sell a fan that had belonged to her famed ancestor. She described the heirloom as an "exceptionally fine piece of antique carving"—a memento she could not bear to part with for, say, less than five thousand dollars. The museum evidently declined. Gale noted that Morton carried this fan to the "ball given to Lafayette in Boston," hosted by Hepzibah Swan at the opulent Swan House. One of the officers there remarked that she "spoke the most beautiful French that he had heard in the western world." The fan is a significant emblem, for, in French salon society, a symbolic language revolved around the fan and its usage to convey everything from approval or disapproval to flirtations and social snubs. From the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The inventory also included volumes belonging to George Henry Apthorp, Morton's brother, but the quantity alone illustrates the easy access she had to a comprehensive collection of reading materials. See *Philenia*, 21.

Trumbull served as a soldier in the Revolutionary War with the prestigious appointment of Washington's aide-de-camp. While in Britain to study painting under West, Trumbull—whose father, Jonathan Trumbull, was governor of Connecticut (1769-1784)—was imprisoned for some time, a repercussion for the hanging of the infamous British agent John Andre. Trumbull is buried beneath the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven; part of his epitaph reads, "to his country he gave his sword and his pencil."

First published in *Massachusetts Magazine*, Jan. 1793. See "Lines to a celebrated historical painter, upon his return from Great Britain to the United States," *MMIT*, 49.

For a side-by-side comparison of the two versions, see *Philenia*, 54-5.

*MMIT*, 49-50.

Since both the Apthorp and Wentworth families were primarily loyalist in sympathy, they were constantly under suspicion during the revolutionary years. The local skepticism was buttressed by the longstanding connections of both families to the Episcopalian Christ Church, considered an epicenter for Toryism.

Morton (1750-1837) was born at Plymouth, where he lived for ten years before the family moved to Boston. For Morton family history, see John Kermott Allen's *George Morton of Plymouth Colony and Some of His Descendants* (Newport: Higginson Genealogical Books, 1985) reprint edition. For account of his oratory prowess, see James Spear Loring's *The Hundred Boston Orators appointed by the municipal authorities and other public bodies, from 1770-1852 comprising historical gleanings, illustrating the principles and progress of our republican institutions* (Boston: J.P. Jewett, 1852), 129-30.

Richard H. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 83.  
R. Brown, 83.

Quoted in *Letters of Mrs. John Adams*, Boston, 1840.

Quoted in *Letters of Mrs. John Adams*, Boston, 1840.

*MMIT*, 182-83.

She was especially devastated by the loss of her son, Charles, who died at thirteen from "dropsy of the brain, a disease." Inconsolable, she was at first in complete denial about his death. When his body was interred under King's Chapel she refused to let the vault be sealed and spent the "daylight hours near his body under the desperate possibility that life was not wholly extinguished." See her notes from

“Lamentations of an unfortunate mother, over the tomb of her only son,” *MMIT*, 260-261, n. 281-282.

The Mortons lived there until the early months of 1789, when they moved their family to a new ornately designed Bulfinch residence on Dudley Street in suburban Dorchester.

*MMIT*, 30.

I have borrowed the term *parlor politics* from Catherine Allgor. Her refreshingly written study emphasizes the centrality of post-Revolutionary American women to the success of the early federal government. By tracing the behind-the-scenes machinations of women from political families, Allgor demonstrates the critical part that women played in the political history of the republic. See Allgor’s *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Helped Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

See, for example, Cathy Davidson’s study, *Revolution and the Word: the Rise of the Novel in America* (1986), Jane Tompkins’ *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction (1790-1860)* from 1985, and *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* written in 1980—all pivotal pieces of scholarship that broke the necessary ground for later, more-nuanced interpretations of women’s authorial practices. For more recent perspectives, see Shields and Vietto, who both convincingly argue against this vision of manuscript culture as the last resort of female authors as too shallow. Vietto makes the case the most emphatically and most clearly; Shields’ verbosity and at times unnecessarily arcane writing style rival that of his eighteenth-century subjects. Also of note is the reality that both men and women participated to the same degree in this society of letters as well as the fact that the public-performance aspect belies the presumed private nature of this type of document.

David Waldstreicher, in his rich interpretation, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 63. Waldstreicher’s theoretical underpinnings regarding American nationalism inform my project—especially his notion that American identity has emerged through public celebrations and communal events commemorating the intrinsic virtue of democratic ideals. And, most relevant to my subject, he argues that these “perpetual fetes”—public and private, as in salon culture—bound republican Americans from all backgrounds by emphasizing a unity of purpose.

From the *Dennie Papers*, Harvard University Library.

Both “Swan House” and “The Pavilion” were designed by Charles Bulfinch. In a note in *MMIT*, Morton indicated that she collaborated with Bulfinch on the design.

The eighteenth-century actress was considered the “prototype of the immodest woman for actresses chose an occupation the unique object of which is to show themselves off in public,” and even worse, “for money.” See Sheriff, 459.

A period copy located in the American Antiquarian Society contains handwritten identifications of the characters ridiculed in the farce. I mention their social circle only briefly here, as I explore this play as well as the public perception of their clubby network in the following chapter.

See her 1791 prose piece, “On the Day before Christmas,” originally printed in the *Massachusetts Centinel*, Dec. 24, 1791. Here Morton—using the pseudonym *Philenia*—promoted the Episcopalian custom of decorating their homes and churches during the holiday season. This was a time when many Calvinist New Englanders still associated any celebration of Christmas with papal sympathy. *Philenia*, 50.

For a wholesale elaboration of the development of the party, see Saul Cornell’s *The Other Founders: Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America 1788-1828* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

See *Beacon Hill* and *MMIT*, 85.

For offices held by Perez Morton, see *Boston Town Records*, vol. 31 (1784-1796), 11 May,

1796, 430.

The Boston Library Society was founded in 1794; see Wentworth and Clark, 37-8.

See *Letters of Frances Apthorp*, 20 Aug. 1788, from the manuscript collection, Massachusetts Historical Society. The original copy of this tragic document survives today. According to William Hill Brown's biographer, Philip Young, Fanny's five-page farewell was discovered 110 years later tucked into the pages of a book found in a secondhand bookstore in New York. See his "First American Novel: *The Power of Sympathy*, in Place," *College Literature* 11, no. 2 (spring 1984), 115-24.

For descriptions of the effects of various poisons on the human brain, see Howard I. Kushner, *American Suicide: A Psychocultural Exploration* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 43.

Somehow, Fanny managed to avoid detection and to give birth to a daughter in Weston, about fifteen miles outside of Boston. From what I can piece together, the child was adopted and raised in Weston. Oddly, the last passage of Fanny's suicide letter—dated Aug. 27, 1788—was addressed to a doctor and his wife, suggesting that he may have provided her with the poison. However, it is also possible that they may have delivered her child—or perhaps adopted the infant. Because the birth was illegitimate, no legal documentation exists. See *Philenia*.

In her five-page suicide letter, a desperate Fanny writes: "I have no money to make those who know the whole truth declare it. Before long I shall be condemned in a court of justice. Oh my Lord, Oh my God thou knows that my once love [for] Morton is the first and last man I ever knew."

The poem was printed in the *Massachusetts Centinel* about one month after Fanny's death—Sept. 27, 1788. This was the only time that Morton wrote under this cognomen.

*Centinel*, Oct. 4, 1788.

The term *coeuer sensible*, or "feeling heart," which epitomized the "Age of Sensibility" in eighteenth-century America and Britain, is discussed more fully in the next chapter; especially as the concept was expressed in sentimental fiction and throughout the public sphere.

*MMIT*, 225.

For a good introduction to the rich history of scandals in American public life, see Michael Farquhar's *A Treasury of Great American Scandals: Tantalizing True Tales of Historic Misbehaving by the Founding Fathers and Others Who Let Freedom Swing* (New York: Penguin, 2003). This breezy book covers public figures from Benjamin Franklin to John F. Kennedy. For a lively exposition of eighteenth-century public life and amusements, particularly how they foster citizenship, see Peter Thompson's *Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

For an exhaustive treatment of the development of criminal law in the American colonies, see Lawrence Friedman's *Crime and Punishment in American History* (New York: Perseus Books, 1993). This truly eye-opening study covers the spectrum of criminal and penal law; he addresses the issues of prohibition, drug use, rape, incest, seduction, and chastity, among others, p. 220. I explore contemporary constructions of femininity, modesty, and chastity further in the following chapters.

The records of the initial coroner's inquest are not extant; however, its findings, including Perez Morton's complicity, were published. See *Herald of Freedom*, Thurs., Oct. 9, and Mon., Oct. 13, 1788.

See the *Letters of Frances Theodora Apthorp*, entry from Aug. 20, 1788, Massachusetts Historical Society.

See *Massachusetts Centinel*, Oct. 8, 1788. The findings were printed about five weeks after Fanny's suicide.

See Kushner's compelling analysis, which delves into the history of suicide, law, and morality

across various American regions and during many eras, 14.

Susan Rubin Suleiman, Higonnet, ed. *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). She further posits that this action is marked by a “destructive narcissism seen by some as feminine.” Women who feel powerless while living may “choose to die in order to shape their lives as a whole. . . . The desire to control one’s own life may extend into manipulation of the lives of survivors—and women are thought to be particularly prone to this motive.” The perhaps unintended consequences of Fanny’s decision certainly had just such an effect on her family.

*MMIT*, 288.

It is worth noting that the *Herald* was an arm of the Federalist party—a group in which Perez Morton had made many political enemies. Published anonymously; see *Herald of Freedom*, 16 October, 1788.

Published anonymously, *The Power of Sympathy: or, The Triumph of Nature. Founded in Truth*, 2 vols. (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Company, 1789), was the first novel written by a native of British North America and published in North America.

Gawen Brown was also the father of Mather Brown, a mediocre painter of portraits and miniatures who studied under Benjamin West in London but credits Gilbert Stuart with being his first drawing instructor. From John Hill Morgan’s *Gilbert Stuart and His Pupils* (New York: New York Historical Society, 1939), 6.

*Massachusetts Magazine*, 1 (June 1789), 380-381.

Even after the publication of *The Power of Sympathy*, Thomas was a favorite guest at Morton’s many soirees. The following year, he published Morton’s rejoinder to Brown, *Ouâbi: or the Virtues of Nature. An Indian Tale in Four Cantos*, (1790).

Kristine Ottesen Garrigan, ed. *Victorian Scandals: Representations of Gender and Class*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992), 4.

Morton, *Ouâbi: or the Virtues of Nature. An Indian Tale in Four Cantos* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas 1790).

She cites *William Penn’s Letters* as a primary source. In addition to *Ouâbi*, her long poem *The African Chief* addresses similar themes.

Morton’s nonjudgmental assessment of the native practice explained that divorce was “the greatest obstruction to the conversion of Canadian Indians to Christianity because of their reluctance at forming marriages for life.” I will revisit the subject of Morton and divorce in chapter five as it relates to the Stuart portraits. *Ouâbi*, 24.

*Ouâbi*, n., 47.

Vietto, 111.

Vietto, 3. I should stress that this sort of literary performance refers to readings of *original* works of fiction, poetry, critical writings, etc. This exercise is not to be confused with the artifice of similar public displays by “women of accomplishments” who merely recited the words of others.

See Shields, p. xx.

As quoted in *Occurrences of the Times, Or, The Transactions of Four Days. Viz.—From Friday the 16<sup>th</sup>, to Monday the 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1789* (Boston: printed by Benjamin Russell for the Purchasers).

As advertised in the *Massachusetts Centinel* (Boston) February 21, 1789. A similar advertisement appeared in the *Centinel* the following week, February 28, 1789, announcing that the 19-page piece was “now selling” at the shop of E. Larkin, No. 50, Cornhill.

See Mary D. Sheriff's 1995 essay, "The im/modesty of her sex: Elizabeth Vigee-Lebrun and the salon of 1783," from *The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800, Image, Object, Text*, eds., Bermingham and Brewer, 459-488. During the late eighteenth-century, any public display suggested *sexual* immorality and was especially offensive in the case of married women like Morton. Sheriff quotes Rousseau on this matter, who asked, regarding wives generally, for why "would [they] seek the looks of men other than [their] husband?" 460.

Dunlap, *The Diary of William Dunlap (1776-1839), The Memoirs of A Dramatist, Theatrical Manager, Painter, Critic, Novelist and Historian*, (1930), collections of the New York Historical Society for the year 1929 New York, Benjamin Bloom, Inc.). Arts chronicler Dunlap kept highly detailed and amusing diaries; this passage was written during Dunlap's stay in Boston in 1797, vol. 1, 177.

The satirical pamphlet was published about five weeks after the release of Brown's *The Power of Sympathy: or, The Triumph of Nature. Founded in Truth*, about six months after the Morton-Apthorp affair was exposed to the public.

The Mortons would not move to Dorchester until the winter months of 1789.

See, for example, "Dejected Wife," which reads: "This heart, which only glows for thee,/To mark that cold averted eye,/Where not one blessing beams for me!" See also these lines from "Successful Lover": "Now beheld thee coldly wandering/Ever changing—still the same/On some dangerous passion pondering,/Kindled by its transient flame." See *MMIT*. Neither of these poems, clearly from this difficult time, was published before 1823, nos. 126 and 125.

Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2001), 173. In this engaging book, Freeman explores the impact of the rituals and rhetoric of honor on American politics during the early national period.

*Occurrences*, 2.

Freeman, xvi.

*Occurrences*, 6. I found no evidence of a love child or that Sarah Morton was unfaithful to her husband prior to the 1789 publication of *Occurrences of the Times*.  
Shields, xxi.

From Brown's *Knowledge Is Power*, 82-109.

David Hackett Fischer's ambitious study, *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), engages with these rhetorical abstractions that are synonymous with American democracy. His novel approach to the subject traces the origins of notions such as *liberty* and *freedom* from the pre-revolutionary era to the present. By viewing these fundamental constructs through the prism of the visual products of popular culture, he explores the manner in which the individual's interaction with these ideals has changed from era to era—and among multiple segments of society—as well as the various interpretations and relative power of the core concepts themselves.

Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 3. Appleby draws upon memoirs, autobiographies, and other data in her excavation of the means by which the first generation of Americans established a unique national culture and new national identity.

From the *Virginia Gazette* (1786); as quoted in Waldstreicher, 61.

Freeman, 9.

Waldstreicher, 56.

This contradiction between republican rhetoric and everyday life found expression in the portraiture of the period. For the impact of sumptuary laws—particularly restraints regarding hairstyle and apparel—on American painting, see Wayne Craven’s comprehensive study, *Colonial American Portraiture: The Economic, Religious, Social, Cultural, Philosophical, Scientific, and Aesthetic Foundations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Excessive consumption had characterized public life since colonial days, but the matter took on epic proportions during the republican era. For colorful commentary and a rich analysis of the history of American tavern-going, see Peter Thompson *Rum Punch and Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*.

R. Brown, 59.

In his innovative *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Products Shaped American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Breen investigates the manner in which the expanding material culture and popular political protests galvanized American citizens from very different ethnic and religious backgrounds for the common cause of independence, 165.

Breen, *Marketplace*, 165.

Freeman, xxi.

These lines were featured in an editorial from the *Massachusetts Centinel*, number 6, vol. X., 10.

Quoted in the catalogue *The Boston Library Society 1794-1994, an exhibition of portraits, views, and materials related to the foundation of the society and some of its early members* (Boston: The Boston Athenaeum, 1995), by Michael Wentworth with Elizabeth Lamb Clark, 37.

See Charles Warren’s “Samuel Adams and the Proceedings of the Sans Souci Club in 1785,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 60 (October 1926-June 1927), 318-344.

Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 419. David S. Shields picks up on Wood’s work on tea assemblies and salons in *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Wood, *Creation*, 422.

*Warren-Adams Letters* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, May 1927), 319.

For Sans Souci Club, see Charles Warren, “Samuel Adams and the Sans Souci Club in 1785,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 60 (October 1926-June 1927), 318-344.

*Writings of Samuel Adams*, Adams to J. Adams, July 2, 1785 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society).

*Sans Souci, Alias Free and Easy: Or An Evening’s Peep into a Polite Circle, an Intire [sic] New Entertainment in Three Acts*. (Boston: Warden and Russell, 1785). From here forward, I will refer to the play simply as *Sans Souci* and will use italics to avoid confusion with the actual Sans Souci Club.

Though the satire was published anonymously, some scholars have attributed the piece to the pen of Mercy Otis Warren. While Warren never publicly claimed authorship, rumors circulating at the time named her as its author; see Wentworth and Clark, 41. Modern scholars remain divided over the play’s authorship. I find it unlikely that Warren wrote the poorly written play, as she refers to it as a “little undigested farrago” in a letter to her son George; as quoted in Wentworth and Clark, 40. In addition to the satire’s lack of artifice, I believe that Warren herself is among those parodied in the piece—she is probably

the inspiration, at least, for the character dubbed “Republican Heroine,” for she was, as previously mentioned, known as “the conscience of the American Revolution.”

This greeting appears several times throughout *Occurrences of The Times*.

From Boorstin’s *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 328. This all-encompassing reinterpretation of American life is the second volume of a trilogy that includes volume one, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (1959), and, in 1973, volume three, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience*.

Joseph J. Ellis, *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1979), 80-81.

I recognize that this methodology is problematic as a result of its dependence on a sample of adults that is not entirely representative of the population. The sampling bias does not account for Native Americans or African Americans, nor for the very poor (of any race), who may have never owned property or encountered legal documents. In addition, many women have been ignored in such a sample. For the purposes of this study, I will rely on the literacy statistics upon which most scholars in the field generally agree.

See R. Brown’s *Knowledge Is Power*. For hard data, see Thomas G. Sticht’s article “The rise of the adult education and literacy system in the United States: 1600-2000,” *The Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, v. 3, ch. 2, 2002. Also, Joel Perlmann and Dennis L. Shirley’s article, “When did New England women acquire literacy?” *William and Mary Quarterly* (January 1991) v. 68, 50-67.

See Harvey J. Graff’s *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City* (New York: Academic Press, 1991). For women and literacy more specifically, see *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700-1830*, eds. Elizabeth Eger et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); though this collection of essays focuses on British literacies, much is relevant to the American scene. For women and their depictions as readers in illustrations and in popular literature, see Catherine J. Golden’s persuasively argued *Images of the Woman Reader in Victorian British and American Fiction* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003). Through an examination of the woman reader as illustrated in popular fiction, Golden points out that female reading practices were both various and hotly contested in the public sphere—simultaneously promoted and discouraged.

I employ this generality carefully, in recognition that these religious reformers situated themselves as the enemies of Episcopalians, Unitarians, and free-thinkers of any kind. I mean merely to highlight the significant relationship between piety and literacy. This broad construct is explored in great depth by Robert Abzug in *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 49.

*A Nation Transformed By Information: How Information Has Shaped the United States from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. by Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., and James W. Cortada. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). This book chronicles the history of information diffusion in America, tracing the roots of the modern “information superhighway” to the 1700s.

R. Brown, 163.

The term *republican motherhood* was first used by historian Linda Kerber in *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980). See also Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).

MMIT, see Morton’s essay, “Adversity,” and pointedly the first of her group of *thoughts* “On Disappointments,” 143, 1.

C. F. Kaestle, “Studying the history of literacy,” *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880*, ed. by C. F. Kaestle, H. Damon-Moore, L. C. Stedman, K. Tinsley, & W.V.



Trollinger, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 28-29.

See Home Demand's "Women and Eighteenth-Century Consumerism" from G.J. Barker-Benfield's *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). This definitive work on the culture of sensibility and its origins in eighteenth-century Britain emphasizes the heightened consciousness of feelings that was largely identified with women and had as its primary concern the improvement of men's treatment of women, 154-214.

Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), xii. Her well-crafted study traces the role that French women played as active participants in the public discourse of post-revolutionary France, particularly in the conceptions of modern selfhood. Her analysis also illuminates much about the potential of a broadened public sphere in the context of the American republic.

Vietto, 5.

Brown, 59.

For more on the role that capitalism and the emerging free market had on the exchange of ideas and the rise of consumerism in the American republic, see Breen's *Marketplace* (2004).

Washington, 1788.

As quoted in Jeffrey Pasley, "The Two National Gazettes: Newspapers and the embodiment of American political parties," *Early American Literature*, Winter 2000, v. 35. Jefferson is being a bit disingenuous here—he later declared, and with some pride, that he had never written a word for a newspaper, 49.

Pasley, 51.

R. Brown, 111. See his *Knowledge Is Power* for a thorough investigation of the role that northern port towns played in the diffusion of information in America from the 1760s to the 1790s.

Freeman, 5.

Freeman, 4.

Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), originally published 1961, 11.

See, for example, Michael Warner's *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); he examines the role of the print media in transforming the connection between power and the people. More recently, editors Chandler and Cortada (2000, see note 32) trace the social/political implications of print culture through the technological, economic, and business history of the information revolution that began with colonial newspapers. For the role of women as contributors to and consumers of print culture, see *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700-1830*, eds. Elizabeth Eger et al. (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Though primarily British in focus, this interdisciplinary volume resonates with American print and visual culture. It contains provocative and original perspectives from Markman Ellis and Caroline Gonda.

Pasley has added another dimension to the discussion by pointing to a general lack of recognition in republican scholarship of the institutional function of newspapers.

Most scholars agree, however, that by the twentieth century, with the rise of the mass media, the birth of advertising, and the public-relations industries, the boundaries between public and private spheres had undergone a sort of mitosis.

Bailyn, 17.

Freeman, 5.

For an account of the Randolph scandal, see Allen Pell Crawford's *Unwise Passions: A True Story of a Remarkable Woman—and the First Great Scandal of Eighteenth-Century America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). The Morton-Apthorp affair challenges the veracity of Crawford's title; they beat the Randolphs for the title by several months—and they were not the first.

Many similarities in the nature of the two scandals include adultery and seduction by a married spouse of a young sister (at 18 and 20 years old); illegitimate children; and duels to preserve the honor of the sister. Like the Apthorp women, the Randolph sisters stood by one another, and some major players from early days of the American republic were involved. Randolph would ultimately succeed in the impossible by triumphing over her infamy. She would eventually marry, in 1809, the broad-minded Gouverneur Morris—after first working as his housekeeper—to become the mistress of his palatial New York estate, Morristania. When visiting English painter, James Sharples, came through New York the following year, the newlyweds even sat for their portraits. See Brookhiser, 182-185.

Thomas Jefferson, as quoted in Nina Baym's *At Home with History: History Books and Women's Sphere Before the Civil War*. This paper was first presented in October 1991 as part of the American Antiquarian Society's ninth annual James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book in American Culture (Worcester, Mass: American Antiquarian Society, 1992), 278.

For seminal work on the culture of sensibility and its origins in eighteenth-century Britain, see G.J. Barker-Benfield's *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). This definitive work emphasizes the heightened consciousness of feelings that was largely identified with women, and it had as its primary concern the improvement of men's treatment of women. For a more recent and innovative collection of essays that challenge the association of sentimentality strictly with femininity, look to *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*, eds. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Also see Julia Stern's *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), Stern's rather lofty language aside, her analysis of the emotional history of America in the years following the Revolution does present a novel approach to the period. She contends that the melodramatic tone of the sentimental novel is the result of a collective national mourning over the violence of the Revolution and a belief that the power of democracy would result in genuine sympathy.

Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

That early blossoming of American sentimental fiction has been ably chronicled by prominent literary historians, including Alexander Cowie, James Hart, Herbert Brown, and, more recently, Cathy N. Davidson. These scholars have generally emphasized the controversial character of early sentimental novels, describing how conservative moralists of the day condemned such fiction as tending to *overstimulate* the imaginations and corrupt the morals of their multifarious audience—female readers in particular.

Vietto challenges the longstanding assumption that women writers were somehow forced to publish in the sentimental style as a result of gender discrimination barring them access to more-respected literary productions or that female authors needed to employ the genre to springboard their entrée into the elite society of letters.

For pioneering work on American women and their early literary/political participation, see Cathy N. Davidson's *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 8.

Originally published in *Massachusetts Magazine*, July 1791; the popular and widely published verse was reprinted within the month in the *Columbian Centinel*, June, 9, 1792.

*MMIT*, 202.

Morton's perspective illustrates the sort of "false empathy" articulated by Richard Delgado—

drawing upon the Gramscian notion of false consciousness—whereby a white person believes he or she is identifying with a person of color, but in fact she is doing so only in a slight, superficial way. The *coeur sensible* construct, as I see it, with its reliance on the empathic imagination and the senses, lends itself naturally to such a style of identification. This is not to imply that Morton was in any sense a racist, merely that to characterize her as an abolitionist is a bit anachronistic. See Delgado's "Rodrigo's Eleventh Chronicle: Empathy and False Empathy," *California Law Review*, v. 84, n. 1, 61-100, Jan. 1996.

See *MMIT*, 186.

For a good overview of the subject as well as more recent perspectives, see Andrew Burstein's 2001 article, "The Political Character of Sympathy," *Journal of the Early Republic*, v. 21, no. 4 (Winter, 2001), 601-632.

Ellis, 3. See also Davidson and Vietto.

From *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 152.

Prominent female educators were not alone in the advocacy of historical studies—most leading male educators agreed that studying the past was critical for an educated populace.

Rowson, *A Present for Young Ladies, Containing Poems, Dialogues, Addresses, etc., as recited by the pupils of Mrs. Rowson's Academy at the annual Exhibitions* (Boston: John West, 1811), 54. This collection was presented as a graduation gift to her students.

Baym, "At Home with History: History Books and the Woman's Sphere before the Civil War," 1992, 279.

Ellis, 49.

Vietto, 2.

See Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs*, Julia Stern's *The Plight of Feeling*, and Joan R. Gunderson's *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790*.

Friedmann, 35.

*Occurrences of the Times*, 11-12.

*Massachusetts Centinel*, Feb. 7, 1789.

John Cosens Ogden, *The Female Guide: or, thoughts on the education of that sex accommodated to the state of society, manners and government, in the United States* (Concord, Massachusetts or New Hampshire: Hough, 1793), 40.

Baym, 278.

For more on Edgeworth, see Mitzi Myers' "Shot from canons; or, Maria Edgeworth and the cultural production and consumption of the late-eighteenth-century woman writer," in *Culture of Consumption*, eds. Bermingham and Brewer, 193-214. From Morton's point of view, Wollstonecraft's social and literary ostracism seemed appropriate measures, *MMIT*, 152.

Ogden, 24.

Ogden, 60.

See Friedman, *Crime and Punishment in American History*. Friedman cites a slightly later case, 216.

Ogden, 16.

Mary D. Sheriff, in her 1995 essay "The im/modesty of her sex: Elizabeth Vigee-Lebrun and the salon of 1783," from *The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800, Image, Object, Text*, eds. Bermingham and Brewer, 459.

Sheriff, 460.

*Beacon Hill*, iv.

Ogden, 8.

Though many women were surely affected, some deeply damaged, by the restrictive rhetoric of this ideology, it is probable that the everyday lives of women in the comparatively free American republic afforded them some license. For more on the role of women as the preservers of family virtue, see Linda K. Kerber's *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980) and Mary Beth Norton's *Liberty's Daughter's: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). Also see Norton's imaginative later work, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). Norton's work is particularly germane to this study, as she focuses on one particularly dysfunctional colonial Virginia family's domestic arrangements. Norton uncovers a colorful family history marked by scandal in the form of theft, adultery, and infanticide. She makes a strong case for the debunking of romantic images of the republican past, arguing instead for a more complex reading of the history of American family life.

*MMIT*, "The Sexes," Essay XXV, 219-221.

However, on the question of slavery Morton took a firm stand; her anti-slavery epic poem, *The African Chief*, presents a vociferous though idealistic treatment of racial harmony. It was widely reprinted during the nineteenth century.

*MMIT*, "The Sexes," Essay XXV, 219-221.

*MMIT*, Essay, VI, 155-160.

With the blessings of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Fuseli presented many of his influential theories on art as part of a lecture series from London's Royal Academy, beginning in 1801. He became one of the leading figures of the British Romantic movement.

*MMIT*, from her *Thoughts* on "Vanity," 4.

*MMIT*, from her *Thoughts* on "Self-Knowledge," 4.

Ogden, 27.

See Rousseau's *Emile: Or, On Education* (1762) and James Fordyce's *Sermon to Young Women* (1774) for writings on the dangers and *unattractiveness* of education in women. Though these are both European works, they were widely printed and read in America during the post-revolutionary period. Morton had read them both.

As quoted in Brown, 165.

The term *woman of accomplishments* was not in contemporary parlance and has been applied by modern historians to describe the late-eighteenth-century archetype. I therefore utilize the title for the purposes of expediency.

Wollstonecraft, 152.

The connection between portraiture and feminine excess, though it does apply to paintings of American and British women, is most obviously evident in French Baroque-style portraiture. See, for example, the work of Bouchard, Fragonard, and de la Tour, who each took the decadent, though also erudite, Madame de Pompadour as their subject. Elise Goodman's richly illustrated *The Portraits of Madame de Pompadour: Celebrating the Femme Savant* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) explores the imagery and biography of the fascinating French *salonniere*. Her study is perhaps the first such investigation of the educated woman in French art and provides a useful model for similar scholarship.

For an excellent commentary on these semipublic displays as well as the interrelations between women of accomplishments and their male spectators, see Anne Bermingham's essay "Elegant Women and Gentleman Connoisseurs: the commerce in culture and self-image in eighteenth-century England," from *Culture of Consumption*, 485-513.

Bermingham, 110.

As quoted in Bermingham, 1790, *London Monthly Museum*, 497.

Joyce Appleby. *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 4.

Vietto and Allgor are notable exceptions. See Warner, for example.

Appleby, 163.

R. Brown, 161.

*MMIT*, from one of Morton's *Thoughts* on "Friendship," 22.

See Morton's *Thoughts* "On Deceit," *MMIT*, 3. Morton wrote of the "vileness of deceit," which "gives the imposing characteristic of ingenuity" while "ascribing the treasons of artifice to the ascendancy of genius."

From Dennie's short-run Boston journal, *The Tablet*, Boston, 21 July 1795. Morton was a contributor to and perhaps small financial backer of the publication.

Her husband, Edward Wortley Montagu, was the British ambassador to Turkey. Lady "Mary" Montagu accompanied him on the trip to Constantinople, where she established her unique epistolary style. She took in all of the sights and sounds of the exotic region, investigating mosques and regularly visiting Turkish baths as well as the women of the harems, whom she ultimately came to respect. Montagu reported upon every detail for a rapt British audience. Author Alexander Pope was in love with her—an affection she did not return and even laughed about. Eventually, she abandoned her husband for Venice in pursuit of Italian intellectual, Francesco Algarotti, with whom she was infatuated. This time, Montagu was the disappointed party.

*Dennie Papers*, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library (27 March 1997).

The original article by Marion McBride, "Some Old Dorchester Houses," *New England Magazine*, May 1890 (pp. 314-317), was the source for Brayley's slightly later account in the *Bostonian*, October 1894. See *Philenia*, 71.

*Philenia*, 76.

Belknap authored *A History of New Hampshire*, Ramsay a *History of the American Revolution* and Minot a *History of Shay's Rebellion*.

*Philenia*, 46-7.

*The Diary of William Dunlap*, Boston 1797, 174.

Dunlap, *Diaries*, Boston, Dec. 2, 1797, 177.

Published, printed by Manning and Loring, Boston.

Morton warmly hoped for Adams that no fawning crowd would appear to “wound thy wearied ear,/No flatterer comes, with traitor mind,/But honour, as thy soul sincere,/And friendship, like thine accent kind.” See *MMIT*, 194.

*MMIT*, 253.

See Ellen G. Miles, et al., *American Paintings of the Eighteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1885), 216-218.

See Stuart’s *Counsellor John Dunn* (Philadelphia, c. 1798), housed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

For more information, see Paul S. Harris’s 1964 article in the *Winterthur Portfolio*, “Gilbert Stuart and a Portrait of Mrs. Sarah Apthorp Morton,” published by The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, no. 1, 188.

Within a year of Stuart’s death in 1828, Morton sold *Counsellor John Dunn* to George W. Brimmer; Dunn is thought to have died one year earlier. Art historian and Stuart scholar Lawrence Park documents a receipt confirming the sale among Brimmer’s papers. See Park’s *Gilbert Stuart: An Illustrated Descriptive List of His Work* (New York: W. E. Rutledge, 1926), v. 1, 295.

Morton and Washington may have known each other longer, as Perez Morton had many dealings with the president when Morton was a representative from Massachusetts.

*MMIT*, 137.

Washington’s copy of *Beacon Hill* is housed at the library of the Boston Athenaeum.

The following chapter treats the three Stuart portraits of Morton in greater detail.

“Conciliation,” *MMIT*, 183.

See Howard Swiggett’s *The Extraordinary Mr. Morris* (New York: Doubleday, 1952). More recently, see Richard Brookhiser, *Gentleman Revolutionary: Gouverneur Morris: The Rake Who Wrote the Constitution*, (New York: Free Press, 2003). This rather light biography of the fascinating Morris is an enjoyable read; however, I found it, at least in his treatment of his romantic liaison with Morton, a bit slim on documentation.

Brookhiser, *xvi*.

Brookhiser, *xvii*.

Morris would eventually marry a social pariah—his one-time housekeeper, Nancy Randolph. Unlike most of his contemporaries, the exceptionally progressive Morris was not troubled by her scandalous past. See Crawford’s *Unwise Passions* for more on the Morris-Randolph relationship.

Brookhiser, 142.

The *Diaries* and *Letter Books* of Gouverneur Morris (1794-1816) are housed in the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Morris served on the Committee of Style during the time of the drafting of the Constitution. See Brookhiser and Swiggett.

Swiggett also records this dinner, and Gouverneur Morris recalled the Boston encounter in his diary, 363.

Also in attendance at the Morrisania dinner party were Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Hamilton, the Livingstons, and the Schuylers; see Swiggett, 374.

*MMIT*, n. 1, 276.

*MMIT*, 211.

See Neil Harris's *The Artist in American Society: The Formative Years, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), notably his observations regarding the timing of the initial enthusiasm for the visual arts in British North America. He suggests that "American art, like American independence, awaited the Revolution; both required aims and intentions born after decades of gestation and nourished in the warmth of popular concern" (3). Gestation period over, a popular concern finally emerged regarding the significant role that the visual arts could play in the creation of a national republican iconography.

For more on West, see *The Paintings of Benjamin West*, Helmut von Erffa and Allen Stanley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

Marcia Pointon's *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) presents a contrary perspective on the role that portraiture, not exclusively history painting, played in constructing, even reinventing, the British national past. She further suggests that portraiture—and tightening access to the genre in Britain—served as a means of social control of the increasingly unruly and expanding middle classes.

Louise Lippincott explores this seeming hypocrisy in her fine essay, "Expanding on Portraiture: the market, the public, and the hierarchy of genres in eighteenth-century Britain," from *The Consumption of Culture*, 77-88.

The works of the Frenchmen Du Fresnoy and de Piles, Italians Fuseli and Vasari, and Winckelmann the German were especially influential in the development of British art perspectives.

David Rosand, *The Invention of American Painting* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 7.

This is less true of Charles Willson Peale than of his sons Rembrandt and Raphael. The elder Peale identified himself primarily as a portraitist who felt that portraiture as a genre could be something grand and important.

Dunlap, *History*, I: 220.

Rather, "Stuart and Reynolds," 83.

Though Stuart likely would not have viewed himself as an instructor, he was always hospitable—with his advice as well as his time—to the many young painters who came to learn from the American master. See John Hill Morgan's *Gilbert Stuart and His Pupils: Together with the Complete Notes on Painting by Matthew Harris Jouett from Conversations with Gilbert Stuart from 1816*. (New York: New York Historical Society, 1939).

As quoted in McLanathan, 52.

William Dunlap, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States*, ed. Frank Bayley and Charles E. Goodspeed, (New York: Dover, 1969), originally published 1834, 1: 214.

Dunlap, 1: 229.

Dunlap, 1: 193.

Robert Hughes, "To Shape a Past," *Time*, special ed., Spring 1997, 69.  
Lovell, 13.

For more on the gendered conventions of American painting, see Craven for colonial practices. See also Lovell's *Art in a Season* for republican-era conventions. Pointon's *Hanging the Head* offers examples of republican borrowings from the conventions of British portraiture. For a close analysis of the history of dress and fashion as it relates to eighteenth-century portraiture, see Aileen Ribeiro's extensively researched and beautifully illustrated *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France, 1750-1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). See particularly her essay "Truth and History: the meaning of dress in art," 1-33.

This is true with the exception of Stuart whose focus was predominantly on capturing the character of his sitters and, perhaps, Copley, whose work was initially derided by European art critics for its specificity and his over-attention to detail.

Reprinted from the proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, vol. 107, part 2 (Worcester, Massachusetts: American Antiquarian Society, 1998).

See especially her chapter four: "Reading through the body: the woman and the book in French painting, 1830-1848," 103-160.

Bergman-Carton, 107.

Margaret C.S. Christman, *A Brush With History: Paintings from the National Portrait Gallery*, Carolyn Kinder Carr and Ellen G. Miles, Eds. (Smithsonian, Washington D.C., 2001).

As quoted in William T. Whitley, *Gilbert Stuart* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 122.

For more on Mrs. Madison and her role as society hostess, see Catherine Allgor's well-written 2006 biography, *A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006). Allgor suggests that Madison developed a unique style of "parlor politics" emphasizing cooperation and compromise. First in her role as wife as Secretary of State and ultimately as First Lady, according to Allgor's vision, Madison was not only the principal architect of Washington, D.C., society but also that she had a profound influence on the success of her husband's political goals.

For more on Mason's efforts to lure the famed portrait painter to his constituency, see Barratt and Miles, 287; see also Mount, 267-69.

See Mount, 258; McLanathan, 122.  
Barratt and Miles, 288.

See Breen, Lovell.

See Rosenthal, *Portraiture*, 147.

David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 1. This seminal book discusses how major developments in the arts in England occurred in tandem with the rapid economic and geopolitical developments of the era. His study posits that this moment saw the birth of the modern art world in England. Solkin draws upon the indispensable scholarship of John Barrell, among others, whose *Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: 'The Body of the Public'* (1986) combines aesthetic and political theories to analyze both the function of painting and the emergence of the concept of a "body of the public" in eighteenth-century British art. Many more recent scholars have built upon these two



foundational works, expanding the field to include the American scene—how it was influenced by British painting and art theory and how global market forces helped to create an altogether different sort of art product. Robert Hughes' *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (1997) really lives up to its name. See specifically chapter two: "The Republic of Virtue." See also Margaretta Lovell's *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America* (2005) and T. H. Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (2004). Paul Barlow's essay "Facing the past and present: the National Portrait Gallery and the search for 'authentic portraiture'" also picks up on the contrasts between European and American notions of painting in the eighteenth century. Barlow's essay is included in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (1997), ed. Joanna Woodall.

Think of the longstanding tradition in western art of casting merchants as evil characters, e.g., Shakespeare's Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield*.

Solkin, 1.

See Richard Brilliant's *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) for the first general and theoretical study of portraiture as a genre. Brilliant is particularly deft in his analysis of the changing perceptions of the role of the individual in western society and notions of self-representation.

Dunlap, *History*, 195.

*Ibid.*, 195.

As quoted in Dunlap, *History*, 215.

*Ibid.*, 216.

Lippincott, 82.

Rebora Baratt and Miles, *Gilbert Stuart*, 224.

Stuart's daughter, Jane Stuart, inherited this portrait from her father as part of his estate. In 1862, she sold the portrait to Ernest Tuckerman of Newport, Rhode Island. When he died, he passed the painting to his still-living father, Joseph Tuckerman, who later bequeathed it to his first cousin, Stephen Salisbury III of Worcester. The Worcester Art Museum received the portrait as a gift in 1898. I obtained all information regarding the painting's provenance from the curatorial file of *Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton (Mrs. Perez Morton)* at the Worcester Museum of Art.

The show was mounted by the Copley Society at Boston's Copley Hall from February 27 to March 27, 1902. See the exhibition catalogue for more images (*Illustrated Catalogue: A Loan Collection of Portraits and Pictures of Fair Women*, self-printed by the Copley Society, 1902).

Clinch's letter was addressed to John G. Heywood, Esq., then curator of the museum. Both Clinch's letter and the painting's provenance information are part of the curatorial file at the Worcester Art Museum for Gilbert Stuart's portrait *Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton (Mrs. Perez Morton)*, c. 1802-1820s.

Clinch letter, 1902. See *Mrs. Perez Morton*, curatorial file, Worcester Art Museum.

Mason, *The Life and Works of Gilbert Stuart*. Originally published in 1879, this book was later released in reprint (New York: B. Franklin, 1974), 225.

According to Jane Stuart, Dunn and her father were close friends; see Ellen G. Miles, et al., *American Paintings of the Eighteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1885), 216-218. See his *Counsellor John Dunn* (Philadelphia, c. 1798), today located at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Park, 562. Park seems to have come to this conclusion simply as a result of his own visual assessment of

the two paintings.

Barratt and Miles, 224.

Harris's 1964 article was written for the *Winterthur Portfolio* to commemorate the Winterthur Museum's recent acquisition and exhibition of the Morton panel portrait—a gift from Henry Francis du Pont. One of Harris's stated objectives was to resolve the sequence question; however, the article only complicated the matter. Harris seems more interested in proving that the museum's latest portrait gift was the original of the trio than he does in uncovering any real evidence to the contrary—his account is partially responsible for reviving the disagreement regarding the order of the paintings. In addition, Harris's verbosity and convoluted style—marked by lengthy digressions—are confounding in their own right. See "Gilbert Stuart and a Portrait of Mrs. Sarah Apthorp Morton," *Winterthur Portfolio* (Winterthur: The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1964), v. 1, 198.

Harris, 198.

Charles Merrill Mount. *Gilbert Stuart, a Biography: The First Complete Study of America's Most Famous Portrait Painter* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1964), 240-243.

Mount, 242-3.

Mount, 243.

British journalist, critic, and virtuoso of the miscellaneous essay, William Hazlitt (1778-1830), wrote extensively on the painter/sitter dynamic. His "On sitting for one's picture" is typical; this essay was originally published in 1823 in London's *New Monthly Magazine*. Though Hazlitt recognized the reciprocal nature of the portrait-making process—that is, when it was between two equals, by which he meant two men—for him, this relationship was complicated if the sitter happened to be a woman: "The relationship between the portrait-painter and his amiable sitters is one of established custom but is also one of metaphysical nicety, and is a running double entendre. The fixing an inquisitive gaze on beauty, the heightening a momentary grace, the dwelling on the heaven of an eye, the losing one's-self in the dimple of a chin, is a dangerous employment. The painter may change to slide into the lover—the lover can hardly turn painter."

Mount, 240-243. Mount employs a rather impressionistic approach to documentation throughout this fanciful biography. This is the only source I have found that mentions Morton's hand modeling, and I am unsure where Mount learned of this.

Evans, *The Genius of Gilbert Stuart*, 1999, 154-155; see footnote 27. The pair of poems by Morton and Stuart, and their publication by Dennie, is the result of the shrewd machinations of three clever associates whose goal was to promote each other's work and reputations via the most visible medium, the popular press, during a period that has been called the American "republic of letters." This coordinated public relations move was discussed more fully in chapter three.

Barratt and Miles, 232, pl. 62.

*Ibid*, 195, pl. 51.

*Ibid*, 218, pl. 58.

From observers such as British writers of miscellany William Hazlitt and Samuel Rogers, art theorist Jonathan Richardson, and of course Rousseau.

Charlotte Grant, "The choice of Hercules: the polite arts and 'female excellence' in eighteenth-century London." *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 75-104.

See Pendleton and Ellis, 80.

Arthur M. Walter wrote Shaw on April 24, 1800. For more on its contents, see Worcester Art Museum curator Laura Mill's well-researched essay, "Early American paintings in the Worcester Art Museum," from the museum's online catalogue, found at [HYPERLINK "http://www.worcesterart.org"](http://www.worcesterart.org) [www.worcesterart.org](http://www.worcesterart.org), 6-7. Mills is responsible for transcribing the letter written to Shaw located at the Boston Athenaeum, William Smith Shaw Papers, box 4.

One engraving, in profile, of Perez Morton does exist. It is located in the Speaker's Room of the State House in Boston.

The Boston Athenaeum owns three copies of "Beacon Hill," one of these is the presentation copy to Washington. Morton's inscription is on the verso of the half-title page.

See, for example, Evans' 1999 study, *The Genius of Gilbert Stuart* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 110; see also the recent exhibition catalog from Rebera-Barratt and Miles, *Gilbert Stuart*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 223.

Ellen Miles, from the Special Exhibition online catalog accompanying the Gilbert Stuart show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, [HYPERLINK "http://www.metropolitanmuseumofart.org"](http://www.metropolitanmuseumofart.org) [www.metropolitanmuseumofart.org](http://www.metropolitanmuseumofart.org).

For more on the common practice of British portrait painters to depict their female sitters in the guise of characters from mythology or literature, see Marcia Pointon's *Strategies for Showing: Women, Possession, and Representation in English Visual Culture 1665-1800*.

Charlotte Morton, who married prominent Rhode Islander Andrew Dexter, "contracted a fever" and died in 1819; see Pendleton and Ellis, 86, 97.

See *Cunningham-Clinch Papers, 1754-1903*, Massachusetts Historical Society, letter from Sarah Cunningham, 1825.

See Sarah Cunningham's 1825 letter in *Cunningham-Clinch Papers, 1754-1903*, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Rebera-Barratt and Miles, *Gilbert Stuart* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 244. The two base their finding on the fact that "while the others are finished images that depict Morton seated, wearing a black dress, the representation of her face is the same in all three paintings." I am inclined to agree with the assessment of the well-respected Rebera Barratt and Miles; however, my rationale is a bit more nuanced.

For the Morton family reaction to the portrait, see Pendleton and Ellis, 82.

Morton, *Port Folio*, 183.

This detail appears in a document located in the painting's curatorial file at the Worcester Art Museum. A letter dated Dec. 4, 1925, was written to Sarah Morton's great-great-great-granddaughter, Mrs. Thomas B. (Venetian S.) Gale of Portland, Maine, by the museum's secretary, Mr. Benjamin H. Stone, in response to an inquiry about the portrait. It reads in part: "[a]ccording to the label on the back of our Stuart painting of Mrs. Perez Morton, the picture was in Stuart's studio at the time of his death . . . [and] is said to have been found on Stuart's easel." As fascinating as it is to speculate about this possibility, it is of course impossible to say with absolute certainty that this was the case. I have not found this intriguing detail in any Morton or Stuart scholarship.

McLanathan, 133. In the summer of 1807, Sully spent about three weeks in Boston with Stuart. See William Dunlap's *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (New York: Dover, 1969), v. 2, pt. 1, for further commentary. Dunlap quotes Sully on his time with Stuart, an opportunity he "valued more, at that moment, than [he] shall ever again appreciate any station on earth," 115. Though Stuart would probably never have represented himself as a teacher, he created a studio environment that attracted many aspiring artists, including Rembrandt Peale (1778-1860), gifted miniaturist Sara Goodridge (1788-1853), John Neagle (1797-1865), and Washington Allston (1779-1843).

After his death, a group of these artists collectively composed a tribute to Stuart in the July 22, 1828, issue of *Boston Daily Advertiser*, noting particularly his “generous bearing towards his professional brethren.” On his attitude toward younger artists, they remembered him as “uniformly kind and indulgent, and most liberal of his advice.”

Stuart liked to refer to his own many replicas of the iconic Athenaeum portrait of Washington as “hundred dollar bills” in acknowledgment of their worth as a consistent revenue stream.

See probate inventory of Gilbert Stuart, no. 28699, Mass. State Archives, Dorchester. The Morton, Dunn, and Washington portraits are not included in this record of Stuart’s estate. The remaining sketches include the distinctly disembodied heads of famed mathematician and astronomer Nathaniel Bowditch (c. 1827-28), historian and intellectual Jared Sparks (c. 1826), two canvases featuring Edward Everett (c. 1820), and Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Joseph Story as well as a head of John Quincy Adams, later finished by Sully. For greater detail on this inventory, consult Rehora Barratt and Miles, 317-18.

Stuart’s portrait of admirer Allston is an oil-on-canvas dated c. 1818. The head of Webster is an oil-on-wood painted between 1817 and 1820.

Poesch, 72.

*Port Folio*, November 21, 1807. The style and subject are consistent with Morton’s work and she was a regular contributor to the journal.

These lines were apparently never published and were, perhaps, motivated by the affection that Morton felt for Stuart who painted only two self-portraits from early in his long life. The verses are part of a manuscript collection, “Poems by Sarah Morton,” housed in the Huntington Library, HM 6272, 213-214.

Dennie’s introduction—written under the *nom de plume* Samuel Saunter—to the pair of poems makes it clear that he had seen the Stuart portrait in question. Further, he mentions the existence of only one Morton portrait, as does the title of Morton’s verse. Saunter’s description of the portrait’s “highly finished” quality applies most accurately to the Winterthur panel; the Worcester version would certainly not have been considered “finished” by the conventions of the day.

*MMIT*, 74.

Mount makes this romantic conjecture most emphatically; see fn. 4. On the other end of the spectrum, Evans asserts (regarding Stuart) that Morton “did not know him [Stuart] well,” n. 27, 155. Evans’ contention relies upon an 1825 letter written by Sarah A. Cunningham to Griselda Cunningham—Perez and Sarah Morton’s daughter and granddaughter, respectively. Evans misattributes the letter to Sarah Morton’s pen. Further, she makes the inaccurate claim that “Cunningham” is Morton’s “later married name,” though the Mortons were married at the time their daughter wrote the letter and remained so until 1837, when Perez died. The “bemused and indifferent” tone of the letter writer, which Evans cites as evidence that Stuart and Morton were “not close,” is unfounded. My reading of the letter takes into account that it was written by an outside observer, Morton’s daughter, whose words validate the true depth and enduring quality of their long friendship. See the *Cunningham-Clinch Papers*, 1754-1903, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.